

**Calvin's "Theodicy" in his *Sermons on Job*
and the Hiddenness of God**

by

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VXORI DILECTISSIMÆ

Abstract

Calvin's "Theodicy" has been substantially ignored or simply negated until now on the assumption that the issues raised by the modern problem of evil and Calvin's discussion of providence and evil are different. The unspoken premise underlying this conviction is that theodicy would be a modern problem, since earlier formulations in no way attempted to justify God's actions.

The goal of the present research decisively goes in the opposite direction. It aims to demonstrate that one of the most important reasons that prompted Calvin to preach for almost 2 years 159 Sermons on the Book of Job was to give an answer to the anguishing problem of human suffering and to "vindicate" God's justice. As if he were installed in a tribunal and with the enthusiasm of a lawyer Calvin made recourse to all the possible formal exceptions and substantive arguments, trying to persuade, convince, and exhort his contemporaries that God, in spite of all the charges made against Him, was not only blameless, but also just. The theologian, the minister, and the God's lawyer were merging within Calvin's person to the extent that very often it is not easy to understand who wrote: the theologian equipped with the instruments of law, or the lawyer armed with the instruments of biblical exegesis.

His attempt found its more appropriate expression, when in the *Sermons on Job* he resorted to the concept of "double justice." The distinction between the "revealed" and the "hidden" justice of God enabled him to try to give a provisional answer to all those cases in which the divine justice was challenged. Nevertheless, Calvin's defence of God's justice reached its apex, when he conveyed the attention of the church to the definitive revelation of God's justice that will take place only in the last day.

Resumé

La théodicée de Calvin a été sensiblement ignorée ou simplement niée jusqu'à nos jours sur la base de l'assertion que les issues soulevées par le problème moderne du mal et la discussion de Calvin sur la providence et sur le mal seraient différentes. La prémisse sous entendue de cette conviction est que la théodicée serait un problème moderne, puisque les premières formulations n'ont nullement essayé de justifier les actions de Dieu.

Le but de la recherche actuelle va décidément dans la direction opposée. Elle a l'intention de démontrer que un des motifs les plus importants qui a poussé Calvin à rédiger pendant presque 2 années les 159 *Sermons sur Job* était de donner une réponse au problème de la souffrance et de la douleur humaine et de défendre la justice de Dieu. Comme s'il était installé dans un tribunal et avec l'enthousiasme d'un avocat, Calvin a fait recours à toutes les exceptions formelles possibles et à tous les arguments substantiels essayant de persuader et de convaincre ses contemporains que Dieu, malgré tous les accuses faites contre lui, était non seulement irréprochable, mais également juste. Le théologien, le ministre, et l'avocat de Dieu fusionnaient chez la personne de Calvin au point que très souvent ce n'est pas facile de comprendre qui écrit : le théologien équipé des instruments de la loi, ou l'avocat armé des instruments de l'exégèse biblique.

La tentative du Réformateur a trouvé son expression la plus appropriée, quand dans les *Sermons sur Job* il a utilisé le concept de la double justice. La distinction entre la justice "révélée" et la justice "cachée" de Dieu a permis à Calvin d'essayer de donner une réponse provisoire à tous ces cas dans lesquels la justice divine a été défiée. Néanmoins, la défense de Calvin de la justice de Dieu a atteint son sommet, quand il a adressé l'attention de l'église à la révélation définitive de la justice de Dieu qui aura lieu seulement le dernier jour.

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Yet I would not be able to end up this research without the sustaining love and deep insights of my dear wife Rossana. Since I knew her, and prompted by her, I felt compelled, first as a lay preacher and then as Minister, to attempt to draft an answer to theodicy’s questions: Why is there so much evil in the world? Why have innocent people to suffer? Why does an Omnipotent and just God tolerate so much suffering? Far from being only a detached and academic research, the present dissertation has represented for me an occasion to clarify my “cogitationes” on one of the most important problems of Christian theology.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to The Reverend Jan Jorgensen, who has helped me by reviewing and adjusting the long and complicated sentences which reflect my Italian and German background, hopefully making them more palatable and understandable to English readers.

List of Abbreviations

- CO *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited by Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss. 59 vols. Brunsvigae, Schwetschke, 1863-1900.
- ICR *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford L. Battles. 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20-21. Philadelphia, 1960.
- IRC *Institution de la Religion Chrétienne*. Edited by Jacques Panier. Paris: Société d’Edition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1961.
- OS *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta*. Edited by Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel. 5 vols. Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1926-74.

Introduction

In an article entitled “*To the Unknown God*” Brian Gerrish states that while “Luther’s doctrine of the *Deus Absconditus* has been subjected to intense study in more than a dozen books and articles devoted directly to the theme, surprisingly there is no such body of literature on what Calvin thought about God’s hiddenness.”¹ Gerrish goes on to state that Calvin scholars “have been sceptical about the genuine unity of the various motifs that have been clustered under the common rubric of God’s hiddenness. More likely,” he adds, “the problem has simply been neglected, at least in its full scope; and it would require a major monograph even to assemble the relevant sources and shape the ‘problematic’ for an adequate, comprehensive analysis.” Some years before T. H. L. Parker had already noted that “the concept of *Deus Absconditus* is as native to Calvin’s theology as it is to Luther’s.”² Accepting then the challenge formulated by Brian A. Gerrish,³ the goal of the present research will be to fill this gap.

Keeping in mind the basic distinction traced by Paul Althaus between the “Hiddenness” of God apart from Christ, with the mystery of God in Christ,⁴ I will attempt

¹ B. A. Gerrish, “To the unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973), p. 263

² T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), p. 11

³ B. A. Gerrish, “To the unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” p. 263

⁴ I owe this reference to John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The interpretation of Luther’s Deus Absconditus and its significance for religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), pp. 58-59

to demonstrate that the idea of the divine Hiddenness outside His revelation is of central importance in understanding Calvin's "Theodicy," namely his attempt to vindicate God's justice before those who "presume to subject the tribunal of God to their own understanding."⁵

Calvin was prompted to develop his defence of God's justice in a more systematic fashion between 1552 and 1555 when in Geneva he passed a time of religious, social and political turmoil. This difficult context led him inevitably to deal with the ticklish questions of evil, suffering and injustice. Why do innocent people suffer? In what way one can still believe in an Omnipotent God? These were far from being abstract and theoretical questions; they had to do with the deep concern the French Reformer felt for the suffering church and the unjustifiable punishment of Job. As Richard Stauffer pointed out, "Calvin était extrêmement sensible au scandale de l'impunité des méchants et de la souffrance des bons."⁶ In order to answer these questions and to defend God's justice, Calvin was forced to reformulate the traditional theological perspective by appealing to God's inscrutability. In such a way the Hiddenness of God became the hermeneutical key of a "theodicy" which, in Max Weber's opinion, constitutes one of the most rationally satisfying in the history of Christian thought.⁷

In this attempt to serve as God's lawyer,⁸ Calvin was facilitated by his previous

⁵ Homer C. Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1996), p. 34

⁶ R. Stauffer, *Dieu la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978), p. 122

⁷ Weber thought there had been in history only three rationally satisfying theodicies: The Indian doctrine of Karma, Zoroastrian dualism and the predestination decree of the "Deus Absconditus," the hidden God of Calvinism. M. Weber, *The Social Psychology of the World Religion*, eds H.H. Gerth and C. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 271

⁸ Davide Monda, *La Carne, lo Spirito e l'Amore* (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2005), p. 27 and

juridical background. As if he were installed in a tribunal, Calvin behaved as a lawyer trying to persuade, convince, and exhort his contemporaries that God, in spite of all the charges made against Him, was not only blameless, but also just. It is certainly true, the French Reformer argued, that when God punishes evildoers, this derives from His revealed justice but, does the same hold true when bad things happen to good people? In response to this anguishing question, Calvin held that the suffering of innocent people had to do with God's hidden justice, and concurred with Augustine's statement that "what is done against God's will is not done without God's will."⁹

The relationship between Calvin as lawyer and Calvin as theologian has been often neglected. John Hesselink points out:

The popular image of Calvin, which continues to persist is that of a cold, logical systematician who stressed the sovereignty of God and taught a deterministic doctrine of double predestination. This grim caricature is then often concluded by noting that with Calvin the Bible became a literalistically interpreted lawbook. He is hence dismissed as a "law teacher" (*Gesetzlehrer*) who knew little of the love and grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.¹⁰

I will demonstrate that this image is groundless, since Calvin used his legal skills only in view of a very precise goal: to vindicate God's justice.

Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole. Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Paris: Champion, 1992), p. 123

⁹ "Let that sentiment of Augustine be ever present to our minds, Wherefore, by the mighty and marvellous working of God that in a wonderful and ineffable way, is not done, without His will, which is even done contrary to His will; because, it could not have been done, had He not permitted it to be done; and yet, he did not permit it without his will, but according to His will." "The Secret Providence of God," in *Calvin's Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1996), p. 33

¹⁰ J. Hesselink, *Calvin Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1992), p. 1

Working from this perspective, chapter one will be dedicated to an examination of the status of recent research on Calvin's "Theodicy," as well as on his *Sermons on Job*. In the second chapter I will scrutinize the key steps which enabled the French Reformer to develop his insights on divine Hiddenness, starting with his conversion, and continuing on until the drafting of his *Sermons on Job*. In the third chapter I will analyze the juridical framework of Calvin's vindication of the justice of God and his continuous use of a legal jargon. In the fourth chapter I will focus my analysis on the premises that Calvin had assumed. His defence of God's justice would be incomprehensible without taking into account the basic tenets of his theology that can be summed up in the following three statements:

- 1) Evil is genuine;
- 2) God rules the universe and history;
- 3) God is good.

In the fifth chapter my analysis will focus on Calvin's attempt to defend God's justice by using the traditional arguments presented by Job's friends. In the sixth chapter I will examine the theological presuppositions of the Hiddenness of God more deeply, trying to demonstrate that Calvin made use of this concept, not because he was interested in sheer speculation about the true essence of God, but because he was convinced that only the notion of the hidden God could give a final and definitive answer to the problem of human suffering. Only from this perspective is it possible to understand the core of Calvin's "Theodicy" which is represented by the concept of "double justice"—a concept that he used extensively for the first time in his *Sermons on Job* as well as the concept of "double wisdom" of God.

The present dissertation represents the completion of ongoing research on a problem that, echoing the words of my former professor at McGill University, Dr. John Douglas Hall, “has been disturbing my peace of mind”¹¹ over the last thirty years, which is to say, how is it possible to justify the belief in an Omnipotent, just and loving God in the presence of the anguishing reality of human suffering. While reading Calvin’s *Sermons on Job* I was struck by the great topicality of his preaching and I decided to start an investigation that is far from being over.

11 J. D. Hall, *God and Human Suffering, an Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 13

Chapter I

Calvin's "Theodicy" and his *Sermons on Job*

1.1 Introduction: The terms of the "Theodicy" problem

The term Theodicy (in French *théodicée*), formed from two Greek words, *Θεός* ("God") and *δική* ("justice"), was coined by Gottfried Leibniz in the late seventeenth century.¹ From his youth Leibniz had used the phrase *the justice of God* when discussing the problem of evil, but the term "Theodicy" first appears in the late 1690s. Having been trained in law, Leibniz regarded theology itself as the highest form of jurisprudence and, consequently, treated the problem of God's relation to the evils of the world analogously to a court case. It was the widespread popularity of his *Essais de Théodicée* which brought the term into general use.

As J. L. Mackie pointed out, the underlying problem implied by the term "Theodicy" can be summed up in the following statements:

God is Omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet Evil exists. There are contradictions between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential

¹ G. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (Yale: University Press, 1952)

parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three.²

The horns of trilemma were firstly formulated by Epicurus (341-270 B.C.)³ and repeated by Hume's incredulous Philo: "Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"⁴ Another way of presenting the problem is mentioned by Boethius (480-525): "If there be a God, from whence proceed so many evils? And if there be no God, from whence cometh any good?"⁵ Traditional theism, holding that God is the creator of heaven and earth, and that all that occurs in the universe takes place under God's sovereign guidance and control, has been challenged by the atrocities of the past two hundred years which have aggravated the problem both emotionally and in practical terms.

Dorothee Sölle expressed the uneasiness of the modern mentality towards the traditional conception of Providence. She wrote: "It simply went beyond my powers to conceive of a powerful God who could look at Auschwitz, tolerate it, participate in it, observe it, or whatever. If he is all powerful, then he is devoid of love. Such was my

² J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" in *God and the problem of Evil*, ed. by William L. Rowe (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 78

³ "Either God wishes to take away evils and is unable to do so, or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; If He is neither able nor willing, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils or why does He not remove them?" This text is quoted by Lactantius (260- 340) *The Writings of the Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Edinburgh Edition, 1951), p. 145

⁴ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), p. 63

⁵ *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand and S.J. Tester (eds) *Boethius: The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 150-1

conclusion.”⁶ To some criticisms I would be tempted to answer: When in the past did human beings experience less horror? In what sense has the situation changed in these last two centuries? For what reasons would the acknowledgment of God’s providence, fatherhood and government be ascribed only to a naive and old-fashioned perspective?

Nowadays the question of defending God’s justice seems to have become the ‘Achilles heel’ of Augustinian, Thomistic and Calvinistic “Theodicy”. Many of the reactions against traditional theism have been directed toward John Calvin, who might easily have been accused of emphasizing the implications of classical theism by stressing the notion that God’s omnipotence means a monopoly on power and by leaving no space for human freedom. In particular, his doctrine of Providence has been profoundly questioned. Albert Outler significantly admitted: “We can no longer argue for a doctrine that portrays providence as a divine genie, favouring the favored, or unrolling the script of history, with sneak previews as special service for the sharp-eyed and knowledgeable.”⁷

On the other hand, while attempting to summarize Calvin’s point of view, some scholars have suggested differing interpretations that are not always reducible under a common denominator. Theodore Plantinga, a theologian belonging to the Reformed tradition, has openly confessed:

I do not believe that those who seek a theodicy or a theoretical solution to the problem of evil will find it in Calvinism, or anywhere else for that matter.

What Calvinism offers instead is a perspective which does not dispel the mystery of evil but does indeed assist us in learning to cope with evil. That

⁶ D. Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 98

⁷ A. Outler, *Who trusts in God? Musings on the meaning of Providence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 70

perspective on evil cannot be divorced from an awareness of the coming Kingdom of God. The victory and full establishment of that Kingdom will spell the end for evil. Thus Calvinism responds to the problem of evil with an eschatology rather than a theodicy.⁸

Hans Küng comments:

Indeed, atheists and sceptics are right: none of the great spirits of humanity, whether Augustine or Thomas or Calvin, Leibniz or Hegel has solved the basic problem (of theodicy). Kant wrote his *On the Failure of all Philosophical Attempts at a Theodicy* in 1791, when in Paris people were thinking of doing away with God and replacing Him with the goddess Reason.⁹

Often Calvin's vindication of God's justice has been substantially ignored or simply negated on the assumption that theodicy must be a modern problem, since earlier formulations in no way attempted to justify God's actions. An example of the tendency to ignore Calvin can be found in the work *Christian Theology: An Introduction*¹⁰ where the prolific British theologian Alister E. McGrath listed the various answers given by Irenaeus, Augustine, Karl Barth and by some other modern theologians without mentioning even "incidenter tantum" the contribution of any of the Protestant Reformers.

The reasons for the omission were explained by the same author, in a former work, entitled *Modern Christian Thought*.¹¹ Having postulated that "theodicy is a creature of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought" and stating "how

⁸ T. Plantinga, *Learning to live with Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 135

⁹ H. Küng, *Credo, The Apostles' Creed explained for Today* (London: SCM Press, Ltd, 1992), p. 90

¹⁰ A. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 228-232

¹¹ A. McGrath, *Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993)

questionable is the suggestion that St. Augustine was dealing with essentially the same problem as Richard Swinburne,” A. E. McGrath wrote:

Thus even a cursory reading of Augustine’s texts indicates that he viewed the problem of evil in the context of the saving transformation of the human soul by God, in which case it would be implausible to maintain that (for him) these problems are concerned necessarily with the existence or the goodness of God (as they are for the contemporary theodicy): to be the author of our salvation, God has to be God, that is, divinity has constitutively to be and to be supremely good.¹²

The same opinion is shared by Stanley Hauerwas, who thinks that “there is no problem of evil in Christian faith,” since its creation is a correlative of the creation of a god, that it was presumed, could be known separate from a community of people at worship.”¹³

A further example of the tendency to negate “sic et simpliciter” Calvin’s contribution can be found in Jeffrey Shoulson.¹⁴ He wrote:

The Protestantism of Luther or Calvin was inimical to the very notion of theodicy. Although both Christian reformers insisted on the human capacity to interpret the Scriptures without being subject to the dictates of a central authority like Rome, both also acknowledged the profound epistemological shortcomings inherent in any human attempt to understand the nature and the ways of God. Calvin insisted that to “be ignorant of things which it is neither

¹² McGrath, *Modern Christian Thought*, p. 192

¹³ S. Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990) chap. 2. I owe this quotation to Tyron L. Inbody, *The Transforming God, An interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 32

¹⁴ J. Shoulson, *Milton and the Rabbis, Hebraism, Hellenism and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 41

possible nor lawful to know is to be learned,” and he recommended a kind of learned ignorance on matters involving divine reason and the nature of God.

Calvin did insist upon God’s rationality, but he placed it beyond the reach of human understanding, effectively denying the possibility of a theodicy.

Thomas Steinmetz comes to the same conclusion, stating:

When the question of God’s justice is raised by Paul, Calvin responds by adopting a severely antiapologetic stance. Whereas Thomas offers a limited theodicy and Bucer appeals to God’s goodness, Calvin takes the position that to mount a spirited defence of God’s justice is to detract from God’s honour.¹⁵

In the light of the above mentioned considerations, it is no wonder that only a limited number of works have decided to take into account a theodicy that, as Max Weber aptly pointed out, constituted one of the most rationally satisfying in the history of Christian thought.¹⁶ On these works I will dwell before analysing Calvin’s *Sermons on Job*.

1.2. The current state of interpretation on Calvin’s “Theodicy”

John Hick: *Evil and the God of Love*

John Hick’s book¹⁷ represents one of the most exhaustive essays on the general problem of theodicy. It aimed to seek a satisfactory answer to the question asking if “the presence of evil in the world [can] be reconciled with the existence of a God who

¹⁵ T. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 151

¹⁶ Weber thought there had been in history only three rationally satisfying theodicies: The Indian doctrine of Karma, the Zoroastrian dualism and the predestination decree of the *Deus Absconditus*. “The Hidden God of Calvinism” in *The social psychology of the World Religion*, eds H.H. Gerth and C. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 271

¹⁷ J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968)

is unlimited both in goodness and power?”¹⁸ Although the attention of the author is mainly concentrated on a meticulous examination of two types of theodicies, those of Augustine and Irenaeus, approximately eleven pages in VI chapter are devoted to John Calvin. John Hick reaches this three part conclusion; that the French Reformer:

1) “so emphasized the sovereign divine freedom, in abstraction from the total Christian conception of the divine nature, as to call God’s goodness and love seriously into question.”¹⁹

2) “had no general theory of the nature of evil such as Augustine offered in his privative analysis.”²⁰

3) “shared to the full, and even carry further, Augustine’s strong doctrine of the fall of man and its paradoxical counterpoise in an equally strong doctrine of predestination.”²¹

The outcome of having elevated the doctrine of predestination to the centre of theodicy would bring about the effect of not only losing “the supreme insight and faith of New Testament monotheism, that God loves all his human children with an infinite and irrevocable love,” but would also cause a revival “of the conception of God as the Lord of a chosen in-group whom He loves, who are surrounded by an alien out-group whom He hates.”²²

A deep misunderstanding underlies Hick’s analysis. The doctrine of predestination is related to the doctrine of salvation effected by Jesus Christ rather than the attempt to justify God’s way. It is certainly true that in the first edition of

¹⁸ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 3

¹⁹ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 123. The same perspective is shared by Stefano Brogi, *I filosofi e il male, Storia della Teodicea da Platone ad Auschwitz* (Milano: Franco Angeli S.r.l., 2006), p. 49

²⁰ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 115

²¹ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 116

²² Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 125

Institutes of the Christian Religion (hereafter called *Institutes*) the doctrine of Predestination was treated together with Providence, but already in the second edition it was transferred from the section dealing with God, the creator to the section dealing with human redemption. Undoubtedly at the basis of this choice was Calvin's desire to interpret this doctrine in a wider soteriological context.

"Rebus sic stantibus" this doctrine is irrelevant for the theodicy problem, since it answers the question as to why God has elected some to eternal salvation and others to eternal damnation rather than addressing the difficult problem of human suffering. Every day we see that the innocent suffer and die young while the wicked live long and prosper. Why does this happen? How can God's justice be maintained in view of the fact that innocent people suffer? What is at stake here is not the mere existence of human suffering, but the fact that it hits innocent people. The punishment of people who have deserved it has been rarely questioned, whereas the suffering of innocent people has always been perceived as scandalous.

Paraphrasing the title of Rabbi Harold Kushner's²³ well-known best-seller, the analysis of Hick would be relevant if "bad things would happen only to bad people," that is to say, to people who are wicked and consequently predestined to eternal damnation. But why do bad things happen to good people? With his Irenean viewpoint, looking to a future in which everything will find its explanation, Hick seems to be incapable of locating the core of Calvin's "Theodicy."

David Ray Griffin: *God's Power and Evil*

²³ H. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981)

In the 1976 edition of *God, Power, and Evil, a Process Theology*²⁴ D. R. Griffin tries to answer to the question of how an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God could allow evil to exist in the world. At the outset Griffin is eager to stress the deep illogicality of the concept of an omnipotent God who could “unilaterally bring about states of affairs in the world.”²⁵ In his opinion God’s power over the world could not be understood as coercive, but at the most, merely “persuasive.”²⁶ Entities within the world could resist divine power, so God, finally, is not responsible for all the evil in the world. Even an all-powerful God could not control such evil. Thus, the reality of evil is not, in itself, a proof against belief in the existence of God.

In chapter ten, entitled *Omnipotence without Obfuscation* Griffin examines Calvin’s perspective in detail. Starting from the assumption that in Calvin’s opinion God “really needs no defence,”²⁷ he highlights that the French Reformer:

- 1) believed God causes all good and all evil and that human beings are not free.
- 2) had no answer except an appeal to faith that God acts for a good reason.
- 3) denied that evil is genuine, since all is caused by God for supposedly good reasons, known only to God.
- 4) denied God’s goodness, since God causes so much evil.
- 5) was inconsistent in espousing free will and at the same time in holding that God causes everything to happen that is going to happen.

The text upon which Griffin based his assumption “that God really needs no defence,”²⁸ is contained in the last version of the *Institutes*, where the French

²⁴ D. R. Griffin, *God’s Power and Evil* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976)

²⁵ Griffin, *God’s Power and Evil*, p. 2

²⁶ Griffin, *God’s Power and Evil*, pp. 8 9

²⁷ Griffin, *God’s Power and Evil*, p. 121

Reformer, at the end of a long analysis of the doctrine of providence, wrote: “It will do us no good to proceed farther, for neither will it satisfy their petulance nor does the Lord need any other defence than what he used through his Spirit, who spoke through Paul’s mouth; and we forget to speak well when we cease to speak with God.”²⁹

From this text it is not possible to single out any particular aversion that Calvin felt regarding the need to come to God’s defence. In fact, as we will see further, he didn’t reject every defence of God, but only those defences which were based upon human consideration or, what is worse, upon cavilling.³⁰ He sharply criticised those who would seemed to have been the most earnest defenders of God’s glory, though indeed they condemned Him carelessly. Coming to the heart of the above-mentioned conclusions, it is worthwhile to point out:

- 1) In an analysis of Calvin’s theology one would have expected a more careful scrutiny of the entire corpus of Calvin’s works, whereas the quotations are taken quite entirely from *The Institutes*.
- 2) Some definitions should have be more precise: for instance the concept of “genuine” evil. In all the monistic religions the reality of evil remains temporary, but this doesn’t mean that it is regarded as a mere “privatio boni,” in Augustinian terms. The same can be said in relation to the

²⁸ Griffin, *God’s Power and Evil*, p. 121

²⁹ *ICR* III, 23, 5. CO 02, 702-703: “Ulterius procedendo nihil proficiemus: nam nec satisfiet eorum petulantiae, nec alia eget defensione Dominus, quam qua per spiritum suum usus est qui per os Pauli loquebatur; et ipsi dediscimus bene loqui ubi cum Deo loqui desinimus.”

³⁰ An exhaustive example can be found in the *ICR* III, 23, 7.: “Why should they in cavilling lose their labor? Scripture proclaims that all were, in the person of one, made liable to eternal death. As this cannot be ascribed to nature, it is plain that it is owing to the wonderful counsel of God. It is very absurd in these worthy defenders of the justice of God to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.” CO 02, 704: “Quid enim tergiversando luderent operam? Cunctos mortales in unius hominis persona morti aeternae mancipatos fuisse scriptura clamat. Hoc quum naturae adscribi nequeat, ab admirabili Dei consilio profectum esse minime obscurum est. Bonos istos iustitiae Dei patronos perplexos haerere in festuca, altas vero trabes superare, nimis absurdum est.”

concept of goodness, which can run the risk of being misunderstood, if not specified.

- 3) The criticism that “Calvin’s God is not perfect,”³¹ is in sharp contrast to Griffin’s assertion that in Calvin’s perspective God’s will “is the highest rule of perfection, and even the law of all laws.”³²

As I will try to demonstrate in the following chapters, throughout all his works the French Reformer tried to defend the righteousness of God,³³ and he took comfort in quoting the apostle Paul “who did not look for loopholes of escape as if he were embarrassed in his argument but showed that the reason of divine righteousness is higher than man’s standard can measure, or than man’s slender wit can comprehend.”³⁴

Anna Case Winters: God’s Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges

Employing the title, “The Classical Model,” Anna Case Winters starts from the assumption that Calvin’s “Theodicy,” based on the concept of God’s omnipotence, conceived as power in the mode of domination and control, could be summed up in two main points:

1. God uses evil in the execution of good purposes.

³¹ Griffin, *God’s Power and Evil*, p. 129

³² Griffin, *God’s Power and Evil*, p. 124

³³ *ICR* III, 23, 4: “They will say that God’s righteousness is not truly defended thus but that we are attempting a subterfuge such as those who lack a just excuse are wont to have.” CO 02, 701: “Negabunt ita vere defendi Dei iustitiam, sed subterfugium captari, quale habere solent qui iusta excusatione destituuntur.”

³⁴ *ICR* III, 23, 4: “Proinde non, quasi deprehensus foret, apostolus ad cuniculos respectavit; sed indicavit altiore esse iustitiae divinae rationem quam ut vel humano modo metienda sit, vel ingenii humani tenuitate possit comprehendi. Fatetur quidem apostolus, eam subesse divinis iudiciis profunditatem, a qua mentes omnes hominum absorbendae sint si contentur eo penetrare.” CO 02, 701

2. The guilt for evil is to be attributed to the evil motives and intentions of human beings.

The outcome of such a position, in Case Winter's opinion, would be disastrous inasmuch as it would entail:³⁵

- 1) The severe curtailment, if not the complete denial of human freedom;
- 2) An accompanying aggravation of the theodicy problem, making a credible freewill defence untenable;
- 3) The promotion of oppression in the human community through the divinizing of power of this sort.

Calvin's theological production is very far from representing the main focus of Winter's analysis. One need only to remark that among the more than seventy-six footnotes of chapter two, only twenty-eight refer to the texts, whereas the others belong to secondary, and unfortunately out of date, sources.³⁶ In the light of this unsatisfactory analysis, the criticisms directed towards Calvin's position are often generic and even contradictory. Two examples will suffice!

Quoting a text taken from *The Institutes* Case Winters stated that Calvin upheld "that the will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness, so that everything which He wills must be held to be right by the mere fact of his willing it."³⁷ If this is true, it is not clear why, some pages before, the same author had drawn the opposite conclusion, stating that Calvin would not have concurred with the opinion shared by

³⁵ Case Winters, *God's Power* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster-J.Knox Press, 1990), pp. 63-64

³⁶ One of the most cited scholar (twelve citations) is Mitchell Hunter, author of *The Teaching of Calvin, a Modern interpretation* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1950)

³⁷ Case Winters, *God's Power*, p. 74

Duns Scotus and William of Ockham who held that “nothing is of itself good or evil, the free will of God being the sovereign arbiter of what is so.”³⁸

Even the assertion that Calvin attempted to establish an unsuccessful freewill defence, because he severely curtailed, if he did not in fact deny, human freedom, is weak. In fact, the French Reformer was not interested, either generally or theologically, in defending the notion of free will. For Calvin the simple possibility that man could, with his will, ratify or hinder the decisions of God was always regarded as unacceptable.³⁹ He refused to hold that human beings were simply puppets in the hands of God and thought that human will could be free only when it was turned, by grace, to the good. The seeming contradiction of this last statement in relation to the firm negation of free will was overcome through the distinction between “necessitas” and “coactio.” Man, in committing sins, acts necessarily, inasmuch as he is under the impulse of his sinful instincts, but at the same time voluntarily and not under coercion. The freedom that Calvin had in mind was not the “liberum arbitrium indifferentiae,” namely the possibility to choose indifferently among a quite indefinite number of possibilities, but simply the possibility of doing the will of God in obedient service.

The assumption that Calvin’s theology would have contributed to “the promotion of oppression in the human community through the divinizing of power of

³⁸ Case Winters, *God’s Power*, p. 44

³⁹ See ICR III, 24, 3, where Calvin wrote: “But here we must beware of two errors: for some make man God’s co-worker, to ratify election by his consent. Thus, according to them, man’s will is superior to God’s plan. As if Scripture taught that we are merely given the ability to believe, and not, rather, faith itself! Others, although they do not so weaken the grace of the Holy Spirit yet led by some reason or other, make election depend upon faith, as if it were doubtful and also ineffectual until confirmed by faith. Indeed, that it is confirmed, with respect to us, is utterly plain; we have also already seen that the secret plan of God, which lay hidden, is brought to light, provided you understand by this language merely that what was unknown is now verified sealed, as it were, with a seal.”

this sort,”⁴⁰ is apodictic and historically inaccurate. Oppression and political absolutism existed long before Calvin attempted to realize “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was since the days of the Apostles”⁴¹ in Geneva. The stereotype of Calvin as precursor of democratic values is certainly hazardous, contradicted as it is from his “forma mentis” that was substantially aristocratic, the more eccentric turns out to be the opposite thesis which looks at him as a sullen and intolerant defender of a ferocious and obscurantist system.⁴²

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the schemes of “process theology” have not permitted Case Winters to discern the kernel of Calvin’s “Theodicy.” Contrary to the intentions expressed at the beginning of her essay, the author seems to remain a prisoner of the old and unfounded idea that continues “to caricature Calvin’s “Theodicy” as being deterministic, projecting an absolute power and leaving no room for human freedom.”⁴³

Jürgen Moltmann: *The Crucified God*

The “Theodicy” of John Calvin has been attacked in these last decades from different perspectives including Feminist theologians such as Sallie McFague and Latin American Liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff, as well as Protestant theologians such as Douglas John Hall⁴⁴ and Jürgen Moltmann. The common

⁴⁰ Case Winters, *God’s Power*, p. 34

⁴¹ This sentence is attributed to John Knox, who wrote from Geneva to friends in his native Scotland in 1556: “Here [in Geneva] exists the most perfect school of Christ which has been since the days of the apostles on earth. Christ is preached elsewhere too; yet nowhere did I find that morals and faith have been improved more sincerely than here.” I owe this quotation to Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin* (Cambridge: the Lutterworth Press, 2002), p. 142

⁴² See S. Zweig, *Calvino contro Castellio* (Milano: Mondadori, 1962), p. 862

⁴³ Case Winters, *God’s Power*, p. 40

⁴⁴ In his thoughtful book *God and Human Suffering, an exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 136, after having expressed his strong criticisms against the theory sponsored by Job’s friends, (but not by Calvin) that suffering is punishment for sin

denominator of all these different trends lies in the conviction that Calvin made God responsible for evil and all the bad things that happen in our individual lives and in the world around us.

A representative of the above-mentioned point of view is J. Moltmann, who in 1972 came into international limelight with the publication of *The Crucified God*,⁴⁵ in which were developed Trinitarian and Christological implications stemming from an hermeneutic of the cross. Differing from his former work *The Theology of Hope* in which he resorted to Marxism, in *The Crucified God* Moltmann changed perspective and raised the cross of Christ to the level of the most important hermeneutic principle of Christian understanding.⁴⁶ Although J. Moltmann never cites John Calvin, nevertheless much of his criticisms against the 'apathetic' God have the theology of the French Reformer explicitly in mind.

For this reason it is worthwhile to dwell upon his analysis. From Moltmann's perspective, the cross performs an essential function since it makes us understand who God is. Without the cross of Christ there cannot be any Christology⁴⁷ and "the understanding of the crucified Jesus must be the origin of all Christology."⁴⁸

inflicted by God whose judgement or purgation begins already in this life, Hall points out that "the Anselmic-Calvinistic soteriological response to human suffering is highly theoretical and probably even more remote than the ransom theory."

⁴⁵ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974)

⁴⁶ Even though Moltmann has not dedicated a systematic treatise to the theodicy issue, the major outlines of his approach are clear. He acknowledges that "human suffering is the central problem in most religions" and that "today it is recognized that Christian theology has its broadest and most controversial relationship to the world within the horizon of the question of theodicy. Deeply convinced that in the experience of suffering there is the rock of atheism, Moltmann draws the conclusion that Christian theology becomes relevant only when it takes the theodicy question as an "absolute presupposition", only "when it accepts this solidarity with the present suffering" Otherwise it is the issue of theodicy which lies at the heart of the Christian faith itself. In the crucifixion of Jesus His dying cry resounded: "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" For this reason all Christian theology and all Christian life ought to be basically "an answer to the question which Jesus asked as he died" Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 4. "Only in this way can the Christian faith be true to its own identity and relevant in the contemporary world." Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, pp. 7-31

⁴⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 114

⁴⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 124

Therefore, since the “*Theologia Crucis*” is not only “a single chapter in theology, but the key signature,⁴⁹ the centre and the entry of all Christian theology,” it follows that “all Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ.”⁵⁰

In light of this essential hermeneutical function, Moltmann assigns to the cross two basic tasks, one critical and one positive: to subject to rigorous criticism all that the Christian church has done in theology and in practice and to review all aspects of theology, including among others, ecclesiology anthropology, eschatology and liturgy. However, Moltmann’s area of interest, at least in *The Crucified God*, deals with the implications of the traditional Trinitarian and Christological doctrines as they were formulated in the first Ecumenical Councils.

In particular, the basic question he aims to answer is: What did the cross of Christ mean for God Himself? What was the God, who raised Jesus, doing in and during the crucifixion of Jesus? Why did He keep silent over the cross of Jesus and His dying cry? The legitimacy of these questions stems from the fact that, beginning in the first centuries, the idea of God had been deeply influenced by Greek philosophy and by a conception for which the event of the cross was completely foreign to the reality of God conceived as a Being who couldn’t suffer.

The adoption of this mentality, Moltmann argues, has had disastrous consequences for Christian theology because:

A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any other man. For, a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because He is so completely insensitive, he

⁴⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 72

⁵⁰ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 20

cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for He has no tears.

But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So He is a loveless being.

Aristotle's God cannot love; he can only be loved by all non-divine beings by virtue of his perfection and beauty and in this way draw them to him. The unmoved Mover is a loveless beloved.⁵¹

On the contrary, the only way for Christian theology to not surrender itself and lose its identity is to develop a Trinitarian understanding of God that would affirm God's presence in the suffering, dying, and death of Jesus. In line with this hermeneutical principle of the cross, Moltmann's answer to the above-mentioned questions sounds unequivocal: "When Jesus was dying on the cross God was not absent but working and not simply passively allowing it to happen, but actively involved Himself."⁵² To support this thesis Moltmann appeals to II Cor. 5:19 in which Paul says: that "God was in Christ" and then sums up his point of view by saying:

Logically this means that God Himself suffered in Jesus, God Himself died in Jesus for us. God is on the cross of Jesus for us, and through that becomes God and Father of the godless and the godforsaken. Taken to its final consequence, this means that God died that we might live. God became the crucified God so that we might become free sons of God. In the passion of the Son, the Father Himself suffers the pains of abandonment. In the death of the Son, death comes upon God Himself, and the Father suffers the death of His Son in His love for forsaken man.⁵³

Without any doubt Moltmann, by raising the cross to the level of a supreme hermeneutic principle, has emphasized an important aspect of Christian faith even

⁵¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 222

⁵² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 190

⁵³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 192

though it should not be regarded as the exclusive principle. Nevertheless, one has the impression that, despite the best of intentions, the insight leading to the notion of a suffering God has left unchanged the terms of the theodicy.

An initial question arises with reference to the features of this suffering. Namely, even admitting that God suffered in the death of Christ and is still suffering for the innumerable tragedies of human history, was His suffering voluntary, in the sense that God freely decided to accept it, or was it forced? In the first case the principle of the omnipotence of God is safeguarded but a basic and essential question remains: was there no other way to eliminate suffering? In the second case everything becomes incomprehensible: Why was God compelled to suffer?

Certainly the image of a despotic God fades and the human beings seem to acquire their freedom once again. Nevertheless, with the collapse of the traditional image of God, so any notion of a God who is worthy to be praised and honoured collapses as well. Since God is not able to eliminate suffering how is it possible to pray “Thy Kingdom come” and hope for a better world?

A second question can be raised in relation to the importance of God’s suffering in the widest context of the theodicy problem: Does it help if God suffered? The answer is negative. Suffering remains unbearable even if God has suffered and is still suffering. Paul Tillich attempted to explain the reasons of the success of so-called Patripassianism in the III century. He wrote: “The popular mind wanted to have God Himself present on earth, a God who is with us, who participate in our fate, and whom we can see and hear when we see and hear Jesus.”⁵⁴ The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner remarked:

⁵⁴ P. Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), p. 66

Um, einmal primitiv gesagt, aus meinem Dreck und Schlamassel und meiner Verzweiflung herauszukommen, nützt es mir doch nichts, wenn es Gott - um es einmal grob zu sagen- genauso dreckig geht.⁵⁵

The same argument is shared by F. Varillon, who wrote: “L’idée d’un Dieu qui souffre n’aggrave-t-elle pas le scandale en l’amplifiant jusqu’à l’infini?”⁵⁶ What happens when we try to alleviate our suffering by saying that God has suffered with us? R. Goetz tried to give an answer. After having stated that “this is not much better than the idea of a sentimental butcher who weeps after every slaughter,”⁵⁷ he commented:

The doctrine that God is limited in power solves the problem by sacrificing God’s omnipotence. However to my mind, any concept of a limited deity finally entails a denial of the capacity of God to redeem the world and this, ironically, raises the question of whether God is in the last analysis even love, at least love in the Christian sense of the term.⁵⁸

It seems utterly reductive to criticize traditional theodicy by harping upon the apathy of God. In such a way one forgets that the basic task of any theodicy is to justify the righteousness of God, who by definition should be Omnipotent when confronted by the existence of evil. This is the reason why criticism against classical “theodicy,” whose main advocate was Calvin, doesn’t appear to be decisive. Impassibility was not in itself an important issue in the sixteenth century and didn’t play any importance in Calvin’s attempt to vindicate God’ justice, since the French

⁵⁵ K. Rahner, in P. Imhof/H. Biallowons, (Hg.), *Im Gespräch*, Bd. 1, (München 1982), p. 245

⁵⁶ F. Varillon, *La souffrance de Dieu* (Paris: Centurion, 1975), p. 23

⁵⁷ Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *The Christian Century* 103.13 (1986), p. 387

⁵⁸ Goetz, “The Suffering God,” p. 388

Reformer dealt with it only tangentially in the widest contexts of the most important attributes of God.

Dorothee Sölle: *Suffering*

One of the most provocative book written on suffering is that of D. Sölle and it is simply entitled *Suffering*.⁵⁹ Growing up in Germany of the 1930s, Sölle's theology was deeply marked by the tragic events of World War II and its implications for the Christian faith. Her thought can be understood only in the widest context of a trend of theology, which, especially in these last decades, has become "a new form of orthodoxy."⁶⁰ Sölle states that the most relevant reality is that of suffering. Theology as the "reflective description of certain experiences," then, "originates in pain,"⁶¹ and its "locus is suffering or the disregard for life that we experience all the time."⁶²

In the book *Suffering* Sölle devotes a few pages to Calvin, but unfortunately her attempt to reconstruct the basic tenets of his theodicy becomes a caricature of it. According to Sölle, Calvin's "Theodicy" could be summed up in three sentences that are the common denominator of all the sadistic theologies:

- 1) God is omnipotent and inflicts suffering.
- 2) God is just.
- 3) Every suffering is punishment for the sin."⁶³

Sölle writes:

⁵⁹ D. Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975)

⁶⁰ Goetz, "The Suffering God," p. 385

⁶¹ Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, p. 91

⁶² Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, p. 91

⁶³ Sölle, *Suffering*, p. 67

There is little doubt that the Reformation strengthened theology's sadistic accents. The existential experience developed in later medieval mysticism that God is with those who suffer is replaced by a theological system preoccupied with judgement day. The situation is not viewed from the standpoint of the sufferer; rather it is through God's eyes that things are seen and, above all, judged.⁶⁴

Therefore, adds Sölle, "all suffering is attributed to God's chastisement."⁶⁵

From one text, in which the French Reformer responded to the question "why the wicked are so happy?" with "Quia Dominus eos instar pecorum saginat in diem occisionis," Sölle draws the conclusion that for Calvin as for others, "this hatred for the impious has [its] origin in a deep hatred for themselves."⁶⁶

Sölle's line of argumentation lacks convincing support. In the first place, the assertion that medieval mysticism would have upheld God's participation in human suffering should have been demonstrated. The doctrine of the suffering God, if one leaves aside its naissance with the "patripassianist" heresy in the third century and its re-emergence with the "theopaschism" of the sixth century, remained, at least up to the time of Martin Luther, is absolutely circumscribed and limited.⁶⁷

The assertion that the problem of suffering in John Calvin's works could be concentrated, experienced, and unravelled only from God's point of view is openly contradicted by his *Sermons on Job*, which show exactly the contrary, namely that the

⁶⁴ Sölle, *Suffering*, p. 22

⁶⁵ Sölle, *Suffering*, p. 23

⁶⁶ Sölle, *Suffering*, p. 25

⁶⁷ R. Goetz noted: "Even Luther, who in his theology of the cross affirmed the suffering of God even unto death, seemed to take back much of what he said in his equally foundational doctrines of predestination and the *Deus Absconditus*. When contemplating the purposes of the hidden God, Luther portrayed an inscrutably impassible, divine sovereignty, a portrayal which was even more severe than Calvin's. "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *The Christian Century* 103. 13 (1986), p. 387

issue at stake is not so much the righteousness of Job (that is taken for granted right from the beginning) but the justice of God, who before the tribunal of history becomes the one, and truly accused. Regarding the assertion that this hatred for the ungodly would have had its origin in a profound self-hatred, it is certainly true that Calvin expressed on many occasions his loathing for the ungodly. It is, however, also true that he interpreted the letter and the spirit of numerous biblical texts in such a way as to reveal a yearning to obtain justice which a superficial reading might confuse with a desire of revenge.

Calvin was far from having that naïve vision of existence that seems to countersign some modern theologians so profoundly, who often on specific themes prefer to take refuge in silence. On the contrary, Calvin, as well as all Reformation theology, reflected all the tensions and the contradictions of a time in which the watershed between truth and error, between faithfulness and unfaithfulness was much more clear than today. All the Reformers, without exception, were extremely adamant in believing that with regards to some issues the existence of the church itself was at stake. The Reformers were not only theologians, but also men of action. They preached not only to the church-goers, but also to those outside, inciting, persuading, and in any case indicating the way which was meant to be followed. Their commitment decided the destiny of the church. It was inevitable, then, that their sermons were not only for the edification of the pious souls, but also for the condemnation and reprobation of all those who showed themselves to be indifferent to the Reformers' predications. To affirm apolitically that this hatred for the ungodly would take its origin from a profound self-hatred, signifies the taking for granted of the "id demonstrandum," and also shows that the few texts cited could be better understood within the general context of the Reformation theology.

Horton Davies: *The Vigilant God*

In this thoughtful, but surely non-academic book,⁶⁸ the author explores the various answers that have been given by some eminent theologians to the problem of defending the justice of God in the face of a variety of evils, whether of nature or of human nature. The author starts from the assumption that the theologies of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Karl Barth can be regarded as true attempts “of justifying the way of God to man.” He wrote:

Calvin was a quiet French scholar, who was browbeaten into leading Geneva through the troubles of the Reformation, was always in the thick of controversy, and was forced to seek asylum for three years in Strasbourg, and whose only child died, knew the full meaning of adversity. Yet he wrote the finest Biblical systematic theology up to his day only perhaps to be equalled by Barth in our day. And Calvin’s Institutes was itself, as also Barth’s *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, a theodicy.⁶⁹

Although the work doesn’t have any pretension of being exhaustive, the main features of the theologies of the above-mentioned theologians are summarily drafted. Among his negative criticisms the author shared the opinion of John Wesley on the indefensibility of the doctrine of predestination which is regarded as the cornerstone of Calvin’s theology.⁷⁰ Among his positive criticisms the author recognized that the doctrine of election “not only inspired unflinching courage but also endurance. The

⁶⁸ H. Davies, *The Vigilant God* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992)

⁶⁹ Davies, *The Vigilant God*, p. 6

⁷⁰ Davies, *The Vigilant God*, p. 116

consciousness of being chosen soldiers of Christ enabled innumerable generations of believers to accomplish things almost supernatural.”⁷¹

Armin Kreiner: *Gott im Leid*

In his exhaustive essay devoted to the general problem of theodicy,⁷² Armin Kreiner diligently takes into consideration the various answers to the anguishing problem of human suffering, given throughout the course of history, and summarised as follows:

The “reductio in mysterium”

The mythological dualism

The dualism of the process theology

Evil as “privatio boni”

Evil as a consequence of the sin

The theology of the suffering God.

The free will defence.

The author deals with Calvin’s theology only “incidenter tantum,” while discussing the first of these answers, namely that of “reductio in mysterium.” In Kreiner’s opinion “unter der Bezeichnung reductio in mysterium werden all jene Positionen verstanden, die zumindest die vorläufige theoretische Unlösbarkeit des Theodizee-Problems und damit auch das Scheitern aller bisherigen Theodizee-Versuche behaupten.”⁷³

In particular, Calvin’s perspective could be fully understood as “a variant of the afore-mentioned answer, signifying that the concepts we use for God lose their usual meaning,” as the author points out:

⁷¹ Davies, *The Vigilant God*, pp. 117-118

⁷² A. Kreiner, *Gott im Leid* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Verlag, 1997)

⁷³ Kreiner, *Gott im Leid*, p. 49

Wenn wir demnach von Gott behaupten, Er sei vollkommen gut und gerecht, so bedeuten die Ausdrücke gut und gerecht im Hinblick auf Gott etwas anderes als im Hinblick auf menschliche Handlungen. Derartige Begriffe sind ungeeignet, die unendliche Transzendenz Gottes zu beschreiben.⁷⁴

To support his point of view A. Kreiner quotes the entire paragraph III, 23, 17 of *The Institutes* in which John Calvin dealt with the question of predestination. Even though it is not stated explicitly why Calvin's statement in particular would support his basic opinion, very likely one finds it where Calvin wrote: "Truly does Augustine maintain that it is perverse to measure divine [justice] by the standard of human justice."⁷⁵

This isolated statement of Calvin's in itself is not a substantial support for the thesis of the "reductio in mysterium," although one cannot help but recognize that this motive is no doubt present. As a matter of fact, the French Reformer was able to go far beyond a mere affirmation of the human person's incapability to judge God. It is a pity that Kreimer didn't explore more deeply the theme of "double justice" that played a significant role in the theology of the French Reformer.

Paul Helm: *John Calvin's Ideas*

In this book, Paul Helm, a leading Calvin scholar, has tried to unify the field of the philosophy of religion with that of the history of early Protestant thought. In the last two centuries, especially, Calvin scholars have tended to exaggerate the distance between Calvin and his medieval background, by portraying him as an anti-scholastic

⁷⁴ Kreiner, *Gott im Leid*, p. 56

⁷⁵ CO 02, 728: "Vere enim Augustinus) perverse facere contendit qui iustitiae humanae modo divinam metiuntur."

thinker, or as an anti-philosophical Biblicist.⁷⁶ In contrast to this trend Helm's essay is "concerned with Calvin as a receiver, user, and transmitter of theological ideas, and particularly of those theological ideas that have philosophical aspects and histories to them."⁷⁷ It is especially the fourth chapter, entitled *Providence and Evil*, that is worth analysing. Helm, having explained the reasons why Calvin would not have recognized the problem of evil, as it is usually discussed today, wrote:

A further important difference is that the modern debate is sparked by considering that the triad of propositions: 1) God is all-powerful, 2) God is all-good, and 3) There is evil, has as one of its unspoken premises the belief that no one ought to suffer from evil, or that everyone has a right to receive the good that an all-powerful, all-good God is able to provide. But Calvin, along with the mainstream Christian tradition, emphatically denied this premise. He held that the race is under a divine curse, and that much evil, perhaps most evil, although not all evil, owes its existence to the sinful actions of a cursed race or to divine retribution on such evil or to divine chastisement for it.⁷⁸

It seems that the same misunderstanding which affects other works also affects Helm's analysis: that is to say, the conviction that theodicy would be a consequence of the Enlightenment.

Undoubtedly, the fact that we live, as it is repeatedly stated, in a "global village" has aggravated the perception of the problem not only emotionally, but also in practical ways. Nowadays people do not appear to be worried about Luther's question, "How can I find a gracious God?" People's anguish is not over their eternal salvation,

⁷⁶ P. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁷⁷ Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 1

⁷⁸ Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 93

but rather over the existence of God. ‘Where are You God? Are You hearing our calls for help or our prayers are doomed to be scattered in the vastness of universe?’⁷⁹ Notwithstanding, despite this different frame of mind, the underlying question has remained the same: How is it possible to believe in a loving God in the face of the massive sufferings of innocent people, who, like Job, are upright and honest?

1.3 The current state of interpretation concerning the *Sermons on Job*

Strange as this might seem, the homiletic production of the French Reformer has not been the direct object of particular attention thus far. Very likely the reason for the lack of careful and exhaustive essays on this literature lies in the conviction that the sermons contain nothing really original in relation to the opus magnum: *The Institutes*.⁸⁰ Even though the thesis of Emil Doumergue, that it is in the sermons that one finds the essential Calvin,⁸¹ seems to be too radical, I believe that in his sermons the French Reformer had the opportunity to concentrate his pastoral concerns in a completely different way than in his theological treatises. In the pages that follow I will take into account the most recent works which have dealt not only tangentially but also thematically with the *Sermons on Job*.

Richard Stauffer: *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*

⁷⁹ See A. Peters, “Das Ringen um die Rechtfertigungsbotschaft in der gegenwärtigen lutherischen Theologie,” in *Theologische Strömungen der Gegenwart* (Göttingen: Göttingen Verlag, 1965), p. 24

⁸⁰ Karl Barth, followed by John Murray, held this interpretation. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), III/3 and John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 191

⁸¹ E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps* (Lausanne: G. Bridel & Co., 1917)

Right from the beginning of this valuable essay⁸² the extensive analysis and selection of the texts is evident. *Sermons on Job* constitute an essential part of this work whose goal is to highlight Calvin's perspective on God, creation and providence. Having examined the three modes into which the revelation of God is divided, Stauffer devotes part of his analysis to the singling out of the attributes of God which consistently reoccur in the homiletic works of Calvin. Among the attributes, two are worth mentioning: the concept of "double justice" and that of "double wisdom," which are found throughout *Sermons on Job*. The discovery of these reoccurring attributes, which turn out to be of central importance in the vindication of God's justice, leads the author to deal with the concept of God's incomprehensibility," qui n'est pas expressément nommé par Calvin, mais qui apparaît en filigrane dans certains passages."⁸³

As exhaustive as Stauffer's analysis is, the occurrence of God's incomprehensibility is much greater, as T. Derek aptly pointed out,⁸⁴ since the word "incomprehensible" recurs 144 times in the most various contexts. Stauffer, even recognizing that the French Reformer tried to explain "de diverses manières le scandale de l'injustice constaté,"⁸⁵ systematically neglects taking into account Calvin's attempt to defend God's justice. Regardless of the flaws, this essay is one of the most trustworthy contributions to research on the homiletic production of the French Reformer. It is particularly worth mentioning the author's recognition of the fact that the sermons complete the theology of *The Institutes* as well as that of the

⁸² R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978)

⁸³ Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 109

⁸⁴ Calvin's *Teaching on Job, Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God* (London: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), p. 11

⁸⁵ Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 123

Commentaries.⁸⁶ It is a pity that this remarkable intuition has not been utilized until now by any of the essays devoted to the theme. The conclusions of his work have played a significant role in the present research.

Susan Schreiner: *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives*

Even before the drafting of this book,⁸⁷ Susan Schreiner had concentrated her attention on Calvin's *Sermons on Job*.⁸⁸ In an article entitled "Through a Mirror Dimly" she had summed up her opinion in the following statement:

Calvin stands within the Thomistic tradition which sees the book of Job as a debate about providence. Central to his exegesis is the recognition of the noetic or perceptual limitations of the human mind. Confronted with the disorder of history, the mind's eye squints and strains to see divine justice but cannot penetrate or transcend the present confusion that hides providence from its limited and fallen view. Caught within the turmoil of earthly events the believer now sees God's providence only as through a mirror dimly but not yet face to face. When his friends arrive, Job becomes involved in a debate about the visibility of providence.⁸⁹

Schreiner spends the bulk of this essay demonstrating how Calvin's *Sermons on Job*, intended for the broader audience of laymen within the church, was deeply influenced

⁸⁶ Richard Stauffer reminds us: "L'œuvre homilétique est dotée d'une originalité doctrinale qu'il est difficile de nier. Elle complète l'Institution non seulement par la réflexion sur les attributs divins, mais encore par son enseignement sur la double sagesse et sur la double justice, par ses considérations sur la puissance absolue de Dieu ... Si les sermons abordent ainsi des thèmes inconnus de l'institution, ils se distinguent encore de celle-ci par une série de modifications, et plus exactement, d'omissions caractéristiques." In *Dieu, la Création et la Providence*, p. 305

⁸⁷ S. Schreiner, *Where shall Wisdom be found?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

⁸⁸ S. Schreiner, *The Theatre of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991)

⁸⁹ In *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986), p. 175

by three previous writers on Job, particularly Aquinas with his emphasis upon the importance of providence in the story. She shows how Calvin -- writing at a time of religious, social and political upheaval -- centred his interpretation on the inscrutability of divine providence.

For Calvin, Job's story demonstrated the spiritual temptation, anguish and faith evident during such times when history appears disordered and God's rule cannot be discerned. Schreiner contends that Calvin's emphasis on the timeless nature of the Job story -- rather than the interpretations of Gregory, Maimonides and Aquinas -- has deeply influenced interpretations of Job up to the present day. Indeed, she argues that many current religious commentators do not know how indebted they are to Calvin, and revealing this debt was one of the purposes of the book, given the increased interest in, and use of, the figure of Job.

A flaw seems to affect Schreiner's analysis. What is at stake in Job is not the providence of God, but His justice. Job didn't think that the universe and history were floating about randomly; he was doubtful about God's justice. He feared that God was unjust because God was exercising an unregulated, cruel, tyrannical and absolute power over him. He didn't dare question the providence of God.

In the course of the story Job went through three different phases.

Before his trial he was convinced that:

- 1) God was Omnipotent;
- 2) God was just;
- 3) Evil was the right consequence of God punishment.

In the middle of his suffering, for which he could see no reason, Job began to question the justice of God.

At the end, in chapter 42, after the whirlwind speech, Job recognized that:

- 1) God is omnipotent
- 2) God is just, although His justice cannot be recognized in this life.
- 3) Suffering is not always the consequences of bad actions.

Though remarkable for offering a systematic interpretation of Calvin's theology in the *Sermons on Job*, Susan Schreiner's work fails to address adequately the fundamental reasons that prompted the French reformer to choose the book of Job as the starting point for his sermons from February 1554 through March 1555.

William Bouwsma: *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*

This book⁹⁰ is organized into topical chapters: Being, Knowing, Society, Polity, et cetera and its value is the extensive set of quotations.

Central to and absolutely original in this work is the psychological analysis by which the author portrays the image of two Calvin's who coexist uncomfortably within the same historical personage:

The first Calvin was a philosopher, a rationalist and a schoolman and a conservative, the second was a rhetorician and humanist, a sceptical fideist, in the manner of the followers of William of Ockham, flexible to the point of opportunism and a revolutionary in spite of himself.⁹¹

The strong criticisms that have been raised against this analysis don't affect the value of this work which, as John Hesselink aptly stressed, "is a brilliant tour de force, quite unmatched in Calvin's literature."⁹² Although its purpose has more to do more with an attempt to reconstruct his biography than with the basic tenets of his theology,

⁹⁰ W. Bouwsma, *John Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

⁹¹ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 231

⁹² "Reactions to Bouwsma's portrait of John Calvin," in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripture Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 209

Bouwsma goes beyond an analysis of the sheer biographical data and by doing so deepens the basic tenets of Calvin's theology. The more than one hundred and fifty references to *The Sermons on Job* are precise, and denote an excellent knowledge of Calvin's entire theological corpus. Bouwsma underlines the role played by Calvin as God's defender:

It needed 'rare wisdom,' he writes, "nevertheless, to believe the God of the Old Testament 'just in all his actions and those episodes in which the Old Testament God seemed impulsive and barbaric made Calvin uncomfortable. He repeatedly apologized for this God and tried to demonstrate that his apparent savagery was, properly considered, true justice.'⁹³

Yet apart from these positive remarks, Bouwsma's interpretation of Calvin appears unconvincing.

First of all, he portrays Calvin's thought essentially as a reaction to the uncertain times in which he lived, and to Calvin's own anxieties and fears. Calvin emerges here as depressed, anxious, and neurotic. This is a very one-sided view, and there's just not enough evidence to support the claim. Calvin was a hugely influential theologian whose work contributed to the development of modernity, but to read Bouwsma, one might think that Calvin was merely an obscure pastor obsessed with his own anxieties. Bouwsma also supports the premise that Calvin's work tended to assume God's intelligibility, not only in regard to His justice, but also in regard to His providence.⁹⁴ Even this assumption is not substantiated. It is certainly true that in the theology of John Calvin there was often an underlying attempt to over-rationalise the Christian faith; nevertheless, this tendency of the French Reformer was

⁹³ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 106

⁹⁴ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 106-107

counterbalanced not only by his insistence upon God's transcendence and by the conviction that the first duty of man is to glorify his Creator, but also by his insistence upon the notion of the 'hiddenness of God.' Differing from Thomas Aquinas, who built up a series of rational proofs in order to demonstrate God's existence, one finds no equivalent in Calvin. On the contrary one uncovers in his theology a deep awareness of the otherness of God, and at the same time, the realization that human comprehension will always remain limited.

Peter Miln: *Hommes d'une Bonne Cause: Calvin's Sermons on the Book of Job*

Unfortunately this doctoral dissertation⁹⁵ has thus far remained unpublished. Its central thesis could be summed up as follows:

1) Since anguish and suffering have existed forever, Calvin's *Sermons on Job* could be understood to have a timeless dimension, and would be "a work for all men in all ages."⁹⁶ Starting from the assumption that "Job stands as the symbol, yet the person vividly presented is Calvin," Miln writes:

In these sermons we are privileged to hear the authentic voice of the suffering reformer. And nowhere is that voice so authentic, nowhere is that suffering so apparent, as in the sermons on Job. These are words from the heart. It is undoubtedly for this reason that they so rapidly became so popular. When finally printed, the persecuted faithful everywhere were able to hear through the pages the exhortation of one who not only suffered, but who suffered with

⁹⁵ P. Miln, *Hommes d'une Bonne Cause: Calvin's Sermons on the book of Job* (Ph.D Diss., University of Nottingham, 1989)

⁹⁶ Miln, *Hommes d'une Bonne Cause*, p. 17

Job and with them. Here in the hundred and fifty nine sermons they were able to find anew in their distress a source of courage and consolation.⁹⁷

Miln insists on the fact “that the sermons are not intellectual exercises on why the righteous suffer, but have an intensely practical thrust⁹⁸ and points out that, “as one reads them, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that in Job Calvin saw himself or at least a pattern for himself.”⁹⁹ In order to justify the assumption “that Calvin was Job,”¹⁰⁰ Miln tries to locate the sermons in the widest context of the vicissitudes of Calvin’s life.

2) *The Sermons on Job* have an intensely Christocentric nature. “Whilst dealing with an Old Testament theme, Calvin is still able to proclaim the centrality of Jesus Christ....A Christian life must be centred upon the person and the life of Christ.”¹⁰¹

3) The common denominator of the sermons would be “the incomprehensibility and the majesty of God.”¹⁰²

Undoubtedly Miln hits the mark when he recognizes the timeless dimension of *Sermons on Job*, which deals with the basic question of the reason for human suffering. In this way he dissociates himself from all attempts to read the book of Job independently from the “theodicy” question. Nevertheless, the author fails to recognize that, although the starting point of Calvin’s reflections is constituted by the vicissitudes of human existence, the French Reformer doesn’t dwell on them. His person is not at the centre of his concerns as much as the person of Job. The ups and

⁹⁷ Miln, *Hommes d’une Bonne Cause*, p. 5

⁹⁸ Miln, *Hommes d’une Bonne Cause*, p. 7

⁹⁹ Miln, *Hommes d’une Bonne Cause*, p. 7

¹⁰⁰ Miln, *Hommes d’une Bonne Cause*, p. 97

¹⁰¹ Miln, *Hommes d’une Bonne Cause*, p. 98

¹⁰² Miln, *Hommes d’une Bonne Cause*, p. 256

downs of human existence stay in background; they don't represent the main subject of his preaching, as is demonstrated by the fact that the references to concrete events are occasional and few. His perspective, far from being anthropocentric, is theocentric. What is at stake is not the suffering of Job, but the justice and righteousness of God.

Miln in recognizing that the problem of theodicy stands at the centre of the sermons writes: "In dealing with such a book of the Old Testament not only is Calvin able to demonstrate how a supratemporal Christ is able to work through a natural revelation, but he is also able to come to grips with the problem of theodicy which also arises."¹⁰³ Unfortunately, despite this observation, Miln doesn't delve into it, not even in the fourth chapter which, given its title "Christians in the Image of God: Job the exemplar of a True Natural Theology: Calvin's "Theodicy" should have been dedicated to this argument. A further criticism could be addressed toward the affirmation, lacking in careful analysis, "that the sermons would have an intensely Christocentric nature."

This assertion is openly contradicted by the author himself, when he writes:

One of the most noticeable theological accents (of the sermons) and one which looms large throughout the Sermons, is his utter Theocentricity. This concept is constantly expressed in the form of the Trinity. We note here a sharp contrast with Luther's practice where every sermon concentrated on a Christ centred approach to whatever topic was in hand. This was so even when dealing with passages from the Old Testament. But whilst Luther was

¹⁰³ Miln, *Hommes d'une Bonne Cause*, p. 154

concerned to point to Christ, Calvin was concerned to point to God in His triune fullness.¹⁰⁴

Finally, as I will try to demonstrate, one has to point out that the theme of the incomprehensibility and the majesty of God is not only central to the *Sermons on Job* but is the common denominator of all the works of the French Reformer.

Thomas Derek: *Calvin's Teaching on Job: Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God*

In reading this book,¹⁰⁵ which has the advantage of being one of the latest written on this theme, one first has the impression that the author intends to establish *Sermons on Job* in the broadest context, not only with the incomprehensibility of God, but also more specifically with the subject of theodicy. At the beginning of the introduction to his work Thomas Derek states his ambitious intention and the development of his research: "In chapter 2, we shall show that in Calvin's attempt to provide a comprehensive and logically consistent theodicy, addressing the tension between God's justice and power, the Reformer fails to completely absolve himself from the charge of nominalism."¹⁰⁶ In the light of this intention one cannot help being disappointed, when before the second chapter one reads:

Calvin had not turned to Job because of its obvious themes of suffering and trial and did not believe the book of Job contained solutions to these great mortal dilemmas of universe. Rather, he sought to turn the congregation in Geneva and his own soul, to the reality of God's sovereignty and power in the

¹⁰⁴ Miln, *Hommes d'une Bonne Cause*, p. 142

¹⁰⁵ Derek, *Calvin's Teaching on Job* (London: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), p. 20

¹⁰⁶ Derek, *Calvin's Teaching on Job*, p. 16

contingencies of seemingly disordered life.¹⁰⁷ More than an explanation of theodicy, Job is an uncovering of the very character of God himself.¹⁰⁸

Given this apriorism, there is no wonder then at the end of his essay Derek reiterates his opinion “that Calvin understood the argument of the book of Job to be essentially about the nature and character of God, particularly his incomprehensibility, rather than an elaborate explanation of the problem of pain.”¹⁰⁹ It is certainly true that the doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility turns out to be one of the most important interpretative keys in the understanding of the book of Job. But, one could ask, what is the context within which this attribute is faced and discussed? In the work of Derek the incomprehensibility of God is often discussed in isolation, without any reference to the primary concern that prompted the French Reformer to write one hundred and fifty-nine sermons on the book of Job. Instead of recognizing that the incomprehensibility of God played an essential role and deeply affected Calvin’s understanding of divine justice, and consequently shaped his “theodicy,” Derek uncritically accepts the thesis that only the incomprehensibility of God informs Calvin’s understanding of Divine Providence. Consequently the essential element of the book of Job, as he himself recognizes, sinks into oblivion; “the issue at stake is summed up this way: how can God’s righteousness be maintained in view of the fact that Job suffers as a righteous man?”¹¹⁰

1.4 Overview

As I have attempted to highlight, no essay has been able so far to analyze Calvin’s

¹⁰⁷ Derek, *Calvin’s Teaching on Job*, p. 33

¹⁰⁸ Derek, *Calvin’s Teaching on Job*, p. 44

¹⁰⁹ Derek, *Calvin’s Teaching on Job*, p. 373

¹¹⁰ Derek, *Calvin’s Teaching on Job*, p. 93

concept of the Hiddenness of God adequately nor interpret it in the light of his theodicy and preaching. Whilst some works have “sic et simpliciter” vehemently denied even the mere possibility that Calvin could have developed a theodicy, various studies on his *Sermons on Job* have failed to collocate Calvin’s insights on the hiddenness of God in the widest context of his attempt to vindicate God’s justice.

The Hiddenness of God, far from being the result of Calvin’s speculations on God’s essence, represents an essential part of his theodicy.

Accepting then the challenge formulated by Brian Gerrish,¹¹¹ the goal of the present research will be to fill this gap and “to assemble the relevant sources and shape the ‘problematic’ for an adequate, comprehensive analysis” not only of the Hiddenness of God, but also on Calvin’s “Theodicy.”

The foregoing review of previous research dealing with Calvin’s “Theodicy” and his *Sermons on Job* has prepared us to tackle the basic question of this dissertation, the vindication of God’s justice. Before entering into this argument a preliminary question has to be raised: What mysterious path led Calvin to change his life and to become the “Lawyer of God?” It is impossible to answer these questions without considering the starting point of Calvin’s theological enterprise, namely his conversion and the most significant works which led up to the drafting of his *Sermons on Job*. The development of his theology would be unimaginable without the life-changing experience which overcame Calvin’s reluctance to embrace and fight on behalf of the Word of God.

¹¹¹ B.A. Gerrish, “To the unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973) 263

Chapter II

The origin and development of Calvin's thought

In the twenty years that passed between his inaugural work on Seneca's *de Clementia* and his arrangement of one hundred and fifty-nine sermons on *Job* Calvin witnessed some of the most remarkable and sorrowful events of his time, enduring much personal suffering as well. When comparing the fine, youthful author of an erudite commentary on the famous Stoic thinker with the emaciated theologian in Geneva during the early 1550s, one forms the impression that one is dealing with two completely different men. How did the young and brilliant scholar, author of a commentary on Seneca become the Christian Reformer? In this chapter I will try to shed light on the most significant steps of the development of Calvin's thought.

2.1 *De Clementia* (1532)

When reading Calvin's commentary on this book by Seneca, one notices the absolute heterogeneity of style and content which contrasts with all his following works. However strange it may seem that Calvin concentrated his attention on this book, one might consider the fact that Stoic philosophy enjoyed a good reputation in the 16th century and was regarded as a superior doctrine accessible only to the intellectually elite.

Some years earlier Zwingli had named Seneca among his preferred pagan writers,¹ and his *Sermon on the Providence of God* seemed to echo the stoic perspective.

There are four noteworthy aspects in this early work:

1) The reference to providence:

Examining the respective theories propounded by the Epicureans and the Stoics, Calvin pointed out the similarity between the Stoic and Christian perspectives and the absolute incompatibility of Epicurean philosophy with the Christian faith. The difference between the Stoics and the Epicureans was described:

The Stoics, who attribute the superintendence of human affairs to the gods, assert providence, and leave nothing to mere chance. The Epicureans, although they do not deny the existence of the gods, do the closest thing to it: they imagine the gods to be pleasure-loving, idle, not caring for mortals, lest anything detract from their pleasures; they deride Stoic providence as a prophesying old woman.²

The reference to providence was not casual, since this concept was central to Stoic philosophy which held that history was not random and disconnected, but was directed by a universal good (*fatum*). The work done on this commentary undoubtedly represents a very significant step in the process which drove the conversion of the Reformer. Here it is possible to find the seeds of Calvin's doctrine of providence.

¹ In his *Sermon on the Providence of God* Zwingli had written: "There may be and are elect persons among the heathen; and the fate of Socrates and Seneca is no doubt better than that of many popes. "I owe this quotation to Philipp Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), I. p. 370

² *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, ed. and trans. by F.L. Battles and A.M. Hugo (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969). CO 5, 18: "Haec autem oratio ex opinione Stoicorum pendet, qui diis rerum humanarum procuracionem tribuunt, providentiam asserunt, nihil fortunae temeritati relinquunt. Epicurei tametsi deos non negant, at, quod proximum est, voluptarios nescio quos somniant, otiosos, mortalia non curantes, ne quid voluptatibus suis decedat, pronoean Stoicorum rident, quasi anum fatidicam."

2) The ethical attitude that Calvin inherited from the Stoics:

It is certainly true that the French Reformer expressed strong criticism against the notion of “apatheia” and believed that to be human was to be affected by grief. He also disliked the isolation of the Stoic which, in his opinion, was contrary to the Lord’s commandment to love God, and love neighbour as one’s self. Nevertheless, even rejecting passive resignation, his was not far from a stoic mentality. He wrote:

For this is what tranquillity means to us as can be readily grasped from Cicero’s words [*T.D.*, 4.5.10]: “*In explaining these [passions] I shall follow the ancient distinction first made by Pythagoras, then by Plato; they divided the soul into two parts, one participating in reason, the other without it.*” As partner with reason they posit tranquillity that is a peaceful and quiet constancy: in the other part they place turbulent emotions—now of wrath, now of desire contrary and inimical to reason. Therefore a tranquil soul is composed, and subject to no emotions which the Greeks call *pathia*, that is, passions. Tranquillity itself, moderation of mind, and so to speak equanimity: which our Seneca sometimes calls “security,” sometimes “peace.” The theologians almost always call it “peace.” And this is none other than that very well-known *euthymia* of Democritus, a so called “joyousness” of which Cicero [*Fin.*, 5.8.23] and Diogenes Laertius [9.45] speak.³

If every event is governed by the secret providence of God and not by blind fate, then the Christian response ought to be marked by patience and acquiescence to God’s will.⁴

³ F.L. Battles and A.M. Hugo, *Calvin’s Commentary on Seneca’s De Clementia*, p. 29. CO 05, 22

⁴ CO 5, 154: “Hominis est enim affici dolore, sentire, resistere tamen, et solatia admittere, non solatiis non egere.” This attitude found expression innumerable times. See, for example, Institutes III, 7, 10, where Calvin wrote: “Soit qu’il endure affliction de maladie, si ne sera-il point abbatu par la douleur pour s’en desborder en impatience, et se plaindre de Dieu: mais plustost en considerant la iustice et bonté du Pere celeste, en ce qu’il le chastie, il se duira par cela à, patience. Bref, quelque chose qu’il advienne, sachant

3) A deep juridical influence:

The commentary on Seneca's book, rather than being evaluated theologically, ought to be interpreted in the widest context of the judicial work that Calvin engaged in during the years that followed. As E. Doumergue aptly pointed out,⁵ the young humanist, proudly demonstrating his legal background, decided to defend his preferred author against Erasmus' judgement, employing wording which reveals a deep knowledge of judicial proceedings.⁶

4) The absence of any interest in theological matters:

This commentary is the work of a humanist, not of a theologian. The author was not interested in religion. If one compares this work with the forcible defence of the evangelical truth of the preface to the first edition of *The Institutes* of 1536, we can measure the distance between these two works. Cicero and Seneca more than Moses and the apostle Paul occupied his attention, as it may be demonstrated statistically: there are seventy-seven quotations from Greek and Latin authors, whereas there are only three from the Bible.

As Williston Walker points out, "the Bible was still a closed book for Calvin, for as yet the Bible hadn't stirred his heart."⁷ In the light of these elements, it seems unlikely that this work was intended for use in defence of the Protestants who were being

que tout procede de la main du Seigneur, il le recevra d'un coeur paisible et non ingrat: afin de ne resister au commandement de celuy auquel il s'est une fois permis." CO 04, 197

⁵ E. Doumergue, *J. Calvin, Les hommes et les choses de son temps* (Lausanne: Bridel, puis Neuilly, 1899-1917), I, p. 211

⁶ "Aestimare litem," p. 378-379; "arbiter, arbitrium," p. 32; "damnare crimen," p. 328; "stylus decretorius," pp. 235-236; "formula," p. 378 and 380; "indicere," p. 310; "interrogare," p. 114; "manus injection," p. 115; "pronunciare," p. 22; "quaestor," pp. 124-125. I owe this quotation to Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole, Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Genève: Edition Slatkine, 1992), p. 92

⁷ W. Walker, *John Calvin, The Organizer of Reformation Protestantism, 1509-1564* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), p. 86

persecuted in France. Given the incidental reference to the Neronian persecution, and an implied comparison to King Francis, it is also unlikely that this text was directed to the French King. As Serene Jones points out “unfortunately, the published work never received the degree of critical acclaim Calvin has anticipated.”⁸

2.2 Calvin’s conversion (1532-1534)

Between the spring of 1532 and the spring of 1534, Calvin experienced what he later called a “subita conversio.”⁹ While the exact timing of Calvin’s conversion¹⁰ is unknown to us because he was reticent in speaking of himself, the changes in his life point to Calvin’s conviction that God, in His secret providence, had turned his life course in a new direction, and was teaching his hardened heart.

An autobiographical fragment in his preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, dated July 22, 1557, written about thirty years after his conversion, explains what happened. David’s struggles induced Calvin to compare his own trials with the author of the Psalms. This text is worth quoting in its entirety:

[Just] as he [King David] was taken from the sheepfold and elevated to the rank of supreme authority, so God having taken me from my originally obscure and humble condition has reckoned me worthy of being invested with the honourable office of a preacher and minister of the gospel. When I was as yet a very little

⁸ S. Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 16

⁹ Among the scholars there is disagreement about the date of Calvin’s conversion. Since this question is apart from our main theme, see for an exhaustive analysis of the different points of view, T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2002) p. 24

¹⁰ On the interpretation of Calvin’s conversion, see P. Sprenger, *Das Rätsel um die Bekehrung Calvins* (Neukirchen: Erziehungsvereins, 1960) and J. Le Maire, *De l’influence de L’Université d’Orléans sur la conversion de Calvin* (Bulletin, Société archéologique et historique de l’Orléanais, 1959-60), pp. 328-332

boy, my father had destined me for the study of theology. But afterwards, when he considered that the legal profession commonly raised those who followed it to wealth, this prospect induced him suddenly to change his purpose. Thus it came to pass that I was withdrawn from the study of philosophy and was put to the study of law. To this pursuit I endeavoured faithfully to apply myself, in obedience to the will of my father; but God, by the secret guidance of His providence, at length gave a different direction to my course. And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour. I was quite surprised to find that before a year had elapsed, all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me to learn, although I myself was as yet but a mere novice and tyro. Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led me always to love the shade and retirement, I then began to seek some secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view; but so far from being able to accomplish the object of my desire, all my retreats were like public schools. In short, whilst my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God so led me about through different turnings and changes, that he never permitted me to rest in any place, until, in spite of my natural disposition, he brought me forth to public

notice. Leaving my native country, France, I in fact retired into Germany, expressly for the purpose of being able there to enjoy in some obscure corner the repose which I had always desired, and which had been so long denied me.¹¹

The interpretation of this text is not easy. In exploring the basic account of his conversion, B. Cottret asks: “Is Calvin speaking of himself personally or describing an experience in common to every believer? Finally, how much is rhetoric and how much living testimony? Should the historian then consider exactly when this conversion occurred?”¹²

In order to find answers to these questions, one should consider the phrasing used by Calvin in this autobiographical report. Not surprisingly one finds verbs which have as a unique subject the person of God: “God has taken me;” “God has reckoned me worthy;” “God, by the secret guidance of His providence, gave a different direction to my

¹¹ *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996) p. xli. CO 31, 19: “Et quum inter eos praecipuus sit David, ut eius querimonias de intestinis ecclesiae malis plenius cognoscerem, mihi non parum profuit, eadem quae ipse deplorat aut similia perperum esse a domesticis ecclesiae hostibus. Neque enim, quamvis ab eo longissime distem, imo ad multas quibus excelluit virtutes aegre lenteque adspirans contrariis vitiis adhuc laborem: si quid tamen mihi cum ipso commune est, conferre piget. Ergo quamvis inter legenda fidei, patientiae, ardoris, zeli, integritatis documenta merito innumeros mihi gemitus dissimilitudo expresserit: magnopere tamen profuit, quasi in speculo cernere tum vocationis meae exordia, tum continuum functionis cursum: ut quidquid praestantissimus ille rex ac propheta pertulit, mihi ad imitationem fuisse propositum certius agnoscerem. Conditio quidem mea quanto sit inferior, dicere nihil attinet. Verum, sicuti ille a caulibus ovium ad summam imperii dignitatem evectus est, ita me Deus ab obscuris tenuibusque principiis extractum, hoc tam honorifico munere dignatus est, ut evangelii praeco essem ac minister. Theologiae me pater tenellum adhuc puerum destinaverat. Sed quum videret legum scientiam passim augere suos cultores opibus, spes illa repente eum impulit ad mutandum consilium. Ita factum est, ut revocatus a philosophiae studio, ad leges discendas traheretur, quibus tametsi ut patris voluntati obsequeretur fidelem operam impendere conatus sum, Deus tamen arcano providentiae suae freno cursum meum alio tandem reflexit. Ac primo quidem, quum superstitionibus papatus magis pertinaciter addictus essem, quam ut facile esset e tam profundo luto me extrahi, animum meum, qui pro aetate nimis obduruerat, subita conversione ad docilitatem subegit. Itaque aliquo verae pietatis gustu imbutus tanto proficiendi studio exarsi, ut reliqua studia, quamvis non abiicerem, frigidius tamen sectarer. Necdum elapsus erat annus quum omnis purioris doctrinae cupidi ad me novitium adhuc et tironem discendi causa ventitabant. Ego qui natura subrusticus umbram et otium semper amavi, tunc latebras captare: quae adeo concessae non sunt, ut mihi secessus omnes instar publicae scholae essent. Denique dum hoc mihi unum in animo est, ignobile otium colere, Deus ita per varios flexus me circumegit, ut nusquam tamen quiescere permetteret, donec repugnante ingenio in lucem pertractus sum. Eoque consilio relicta patria, in Germaniam concessi, ut in obscuro aliquo angulo abditu quiete diu negata fruire.”

¹² B. Cottret, *Calvin, a Biography* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 68

course and by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame;” “God so led meand He brought me forth to public notice.” B. Cottret aptly pointed out the meaning of the phrase that Calvin used: “*conversio subita*.” He wrote: “The sudden conversion takes on its true meaning in Latin. It must be understood as *conversio subita*, a conversion ‘suffered’ (*subie* in French) by Calvin, and not an instantaneous conversion (*conversion subite*).”¹³

As A. Ganoczy had noted, “the adjective *subita* was not introduced by a chronicler’s care for precision, but by the desire of a theologian to emphasize the divine origin of the event.”¹⁴ It is also worth mentioning the remarks of Olivier Millet, when he writes: “Signalons enfin, à propos de la conversion, qu’il s’agit d’une expression métaphorique empruntée à l’équitation (changement de direction) comme le montre le contexte: “*arcano providentiae suae freno cursum meum Deus alio tandem reflexit*. Calvin oppose alors “*superstitiones papatus et docilitas*” (au message biblique) de la “*vera pietas*.”¹⁵ -This equestrian metaphor may or may not hint at the conversion of the apostle Paul. Independently of any interpretation which one might make of this problematic text, the meaning of this autobiographical report is incontrovertible: God and not Calvin was the initiator. Calvin did not decide for God, rather God decided for him. His conversion was not the outcome of a long spiritual evolution, but a real transformation achieved by the miraculous intervention of God. The secret guidance of

¹³ B. Cottret, *Calvin, a Biography*, p. 68

¹⁴ A. Ganoczy, *Le Jeune Calvin. Genèse et Evolution de sa Vocation Réformatrice* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1966), p. 302. For this quotation see: B. Cottret, *Calvin, a Biography*, p. 69

¹⁵ O. Millet, *Calvin et la Dynamique de la Parole, Etude de rhétorique Réformée* (Genève: Editions Slatkine, 1992), p. 522. H.A. Oberman stressed the same conviction: *Initia Calvins: The matrix of Calvin’s Reformation* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie von Wetenschappen, 1991), p. 8

God's providence was at the basis of his conversion, and sustained him throughout his life.

The doctrine of the providence of God was not a merely academic exercise but an existential issue for Calvin. As Philip Schaff commented:

Calvin was not an unbeliever, nor an immoral youth; on the contrary, he was a devout Catholic of unblemished character. His conversion, therefore, was a change from Romanism to Protestantism, from papal superstition to evangelical faith, from scholastic traditionalism to biblical simplicity. He mentions no human agency, not even Volmar or Olivetan or Lefèvre.”¹⁶

God himself produced the change. Only God “subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame.” To use Jean Cadier's appropriate phrase, Calvin “was the man that God mastered.”¹⁷

One ought not to read into these words any sense of self-complacency. Calvin was an extremely reserved man and was very uncomfortable with the frequent request that he rehearse his conversion. Even Beza,¹⁸ his friend and biographer, who shared the same house with him in Bourges, was unable to tell us very much. It was only occasionally that Calvin lifted the veil. In a letter to Cardinal Sadoletto he employed the voice of an anonymous convert to Reformed preaching. While it was described as anonymous, it most likely spoke of his own story: “That I might perceive these things, Thou, O Lord,

¹⁶ P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), Vol. 8, § 72

¹⁷ J. Cadier, *Calvin: l'Homme que Dieu a dompté* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1958), p. 23

¹⁸ In his *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) I, xxv: he wrote: “A few months' residence here made him known to all who desired a reform in religion. Among others, I have heard him mention, with strong testimony to his piety Stephen Forge, a distinguished merchant, who afterwards suffered martyrdom in the cause of Christ, and to whose name Calvin gave celebrity in the work which he published against the Libertines. About this time, Calvin renouncing all other studies, devoted himself to God, to the great delight of all pious who were then holding secret meetings in Paris.”

didst shine upon me with the brightness of Thy Spirit; that I might comprehend how impious and noxious they were, Thou didst bear before me the torch of Thy Word; that I might abominate them as they deserved, thou didst stimulate my soul.”¹⁹ Even in this report God remains the only subject. The experience of his ‘suffered’ conversion persuaded Calvin that his life and ministry had been guided, even at times, arrested, by God’s intervention.²⁰ Referring to an overnight stop in Geneva, on his way from Paris to Strasbourg, Calvin writes: “Guillaume Farel me reteint à Geneve, non pas tant par conseil et exhortation, que par une adiuration espovantable, comme si Dieu eust d’enhaut estendu sa main sur moy pour m’arrester.”²¹ As William Wileman pointed out,²² in questioning why the Almighty God had chosen him, and had never permitted him to rest anywhere, Calvin perceived that the secret guidance of God’s providence had been the basis of both his conversion and his conviction to be the legitimate and infallible God’s lawyer.²³ “God overtook Calvin like a robber,” wrote Karl Barth.²⁴

¹⁹ *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, I. p. 58. CO 05, 409: “Haec, Domine, ut animadverterem, tu mihi spiritus tui claritate affulsisti; ut deprehenderem quam impia noxiaque essent, tu mihi facem verbo tuo praetulisti; ut pro merito abominarer, animum meum pupugisti.”

²⁰ As William Bouwsma writes: “He viewed his own career in dramatic terms. ‘I am not ignorant, he wrote Melancthon in 1552, ‘of the position in his theatre to which God has elevated me’; and a few years later, picking up Melancthon’s own theatrical language, he emphasized the superiority of his role to that of the political superstars of the age. ‘Let this [church] be my theatre, he wrote,’ and, content with its approval, though the whole world should hiss me, my courage will never fail. I am far from envying silly and noisy declaimers when they enjoy their small laurel of glory in a dark corner for a little while. What is worthy of applause or odious to the world is not unknown to me.’ In 1534, when Calvin was but 25, d’Etaples told him: ‘You have been chosen as an instrument of the Lord. Through you, God will erect His Kingdom in our land!’ *John Calvin, a Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 178

²¹ CO 31, 26

²² After having said that “We should like to know much more than we do of the secret working of the Spirit of God in the conversion of Calvin”, he recognized “first of all, what is always first, and always at the beginning least perceived by its subject, the secret drawing of the Holy Spirit of God”. *John Calvin, His Life, his Teaching and his Influence*, p. 15-16 in the CD *The Comprehensive John Calvin*.

²³ See G. Boine, *Serveto e Calvino, Il peccato. Plausi e botte, Frantumi*. Altri scritti (Milano: Garzanti, 1983), pp. 362

²⁴ K. Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1922), 117

Nevertheless Calvin, describing his conversion, made reference to David and not, as one could have expected, to the apostle Paul.? Why? Was not the conversion of Paul a ‘suffered’ conversion also? Maybe one can find a partial answer to this question by reading what Calvin wrote in his preface to *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*:

As that holy King was harassed by the Philistines and other foreign enemies with continual wars, while he was much more grievously afflicted by the malice and wickedness of some perfidious men amongst his own people, so I can say as to myself, that I have been assailed on all sides, and have scarcely been able to enjoy repose for a single moment, but have always had to sustain some conflict either from enemies without or within the Church.²⁵

I dare suggest that the reason Calvin consistently referred to David, not only had to do with the experiences of suffering they held in common, but also with similar theological perceptions.

It was neither the youth who had challenged Goliath nor the king with his political power, but the psalmist, who in an attempt to find the presence of the Lord in his contradictory life, discovered the hiddenness of God. Undoubtedly, Calvin identified personally and theologically with David, who, despite his suffering, was able to keep his faith. He would not have called the Psalter “une anatomie de toutes les parties de l’âme,”²⁶ if he had not discovered there the sentiments of his own soul. For Calvin, his conversion implied a break with the perspective that had informed his life until that moment. Against the humanist’s optimistic vision of a human nature, capable of knowing

²⁵ *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), Vol. IV, p. 26

²⁶ CO 31, 16

truth and achieving knowledge of God, independently of God's revelation, Calvin posed the opposing conception of a humanity contaminated by sin, and alienated from God.

The tragic events of 1534 forced him once, and for all time, to take a stand. As Wilemann writes: "We do not certainly know that Calvin saw the burning of James Pavanne or of the hermit of Livry; but whether so or not, he must have been conversant with the feeling of the people with regard to these and other martyrdoms, and must have formed an opinion as to the meaning of them."²⁷ We are certain, however, that reports of torture, exile, and execution throughout different European countries reached him from the year 1535 onward. This news forced him, for the first time in his life, to respond to those who, having left the Roman Catholic Church, asked whether they still belonged to the church of God. Calvin, who was first a pastor, and then a theologian, or rather, a theologian in order to be a pastor, as Jean Daniel Benoit had emphasized,²⁸ couldn't help but respond to this challenge. The doctrine of providence, which he had inherited from Stoic philosophy and developed intuitively, represented not only the starting point of his reflections, but was also the means through which he came to realise the inscrutability and incomprehensibility of the biblical God. The process which led the French Reformer to give more and more attention to the idea of Divine Hiddenness was gradual and implied a deep rethinking of its meaning. In the pages that follow I will try to reconstruct the most significant phases of this evolution.

2.3 *The Institutes of Christian Religion of 1536*

²⁷ W. Wilemann, *John Calvin, His life, His Teaching and His Influence*, p. 16, in the CD *The Comprehensive John Calvin*.

²⁸ Daniel Benoit, *Calvin Directeur d'Ames* (Strasbourg: Editions Oberlin, 1944), p. 11

The first *opus magnum* of the French Reformer appeared in 1536: *The Institutes of Christian Religion*.²⁹ Calvin was just twenty-seven and the Reformation of M. Luther had not yet been fully established. The title given to his first work is worthy of commentary. Instead of using the word “summa” in line with Thomistic tradition, Calvin preferred to use the word “institution” describing not only the pedagogical activity of those who educated the offspring of noble families, but also referring to the most common law manual of that time.³⁰

The goals that Calvin had in mind were twofold: first, to vindicate those who were persecuted and assure the king that they were not disloyal seditionists; and secondly, to provide those who were new to the faith with Christian principles that would enable them to organize a Reformed church. The first purpose appears clear from the preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms*, when Calvin pointed out that it was only after the persecutions had intensified in France that *The Institutes* became a proper defense of the Protestant faith.

Leaving my native country, France, I in fact retired to Germany expressly for the purpose of being able there to enjoy in some obscure corner the repose which I had always desired, and which had been so long denied me. But lo! whilst I lay hidden at Basle and known only to a few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France; and the report of these burnings having reached foreign nations, they excited the strongest disapprobation among a great part of the Germans, whose indignation was kindled against the authors of such tyranny.

²⁹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986) [cited hereafter as *IRC*].

³⁰ Luchesius Smits pointed out the lack of homogeneity in the 1536 edition due to the combined catechetical and apologetic purposes of the work. *Saint Augustin dans l'œuvre de Jean Calvin* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1957), p. 28

In order to allay this indignation, certain wicked and lying pamphlets were circulated, stating that none were treated with such cruelty but Anabaptists and seditious persons, who by their perverse ravings and false opinions were overthrowing not only religion but also civil order. Observing that the object which these instruments of the court aimed at by their disguises was not only that the disgrace of shedding so much innocent blood might remain buried under false charges and calumnies which they brought against the holy martyrs after their death, but also that afterwards they might be able to proceed to the utmost extremity in murdering the poor saints without exciting compassion towards them in the breasts of any, it appeared to me that unless I opposed them to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. My objects were, first, to prove that these reports were false and calumnious, and thus to vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord;³¹ and next, that as the same cruelties might very soon after be exercised against many unhappy individuals, foreign nations might be touched with at least some compassion towards them and solicitude about them. When it was then published, it was not that copious and labored work which it now is, but only a small treatise containing a summary of the principal truths of the Christian religion; and it was published with no other design than that men

³¹ CO 31, 23: “Haec mihi edendae Institutionis causa fuit: primum ut ab iniusta contumelia vindicarem fratres meos, quorum mors pretiosa erat in conspectu Domini.” CO 31, 24: “premierement afin de respondre à ces meschans blasmes que les autres semoyent, et en purger mes freres, desquels la mort estoit precieuse en la presence du Seigneur.”

might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed by those flagitious and perfidious flatterers.³²

Within these words “prove” and “vindicate,” borrowed from his juridical background, lies the heart of the matter. Calvin was neither a pacifistic, nor a person inclined toward compromise. He had the character of a lawyer and, as Serene Jones aptly noticed, “was able to take the rhetorical skills he mastered during his humanist education and apply them to the theological tasks that now occupied his attention.”³³

As K. Barth once observed:

Karlfried Fröhlich noted Calvin’s use of terms like light, fire, lighting, majesty, wrath, sword, battle, and so on whenever he is speaking forcefully, and which then puts together these features drawn from the aesthetic realm to present us with a picture of Calvin’s piety or his God—a picture that I would call a gruesome waxwork model from which, having surveyed it with startled interest, we can only turn aside, because there can be no possibility of rational discussion with it.”³⁴

Consequently the newly published book was not merely a theoretical and impersonal exposition of the basic tenets of Christian faith that Calvin had intended it to be, but was also a noble defence of the persecuted church addressed to the King, as Millet recognizes:

La tonalité judiciaire de l’Institution semble l’emporter en raison de la convergence de plusieurs motifs, qui situent le discours doctrinal calvinien dans le cadre d’une cause conduite comme une véritable plaidoirie. Dans la confrontation

³² *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. IV, xli

³³ S. Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 17

³⁴ K. Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1922), p. 115

de l'homme et de Dieu à laquelle Calvin se livre, c'est la dimension du procès, intenté contre l'homme par la révélation divine à travers les témoignages de la création, puis de la parole biblique, qui intéresse principalement le doctrinaire.³⁵

Having pointed out that his purpose was not to prepare "his own personal defence," but rather "to embrace the common cause of all believers, that of Christ himself a cause completely torn and trampled in your realm today,"³⁶ Calvin wrote:

The poor little church has either been wasted with cruel slaughter or banished into exile, or so overwhelmed by threats and fears that it dare not even open its mouth. And yet, with their usual rage and madness, the ungodly continue to batter a wall already toppling, and to complete the ruin toward which they have been striving.³⁷

Some of us are shackled with irons, some beaten with rods, some led about as laughingstocks, some proscribed, some most savagely tortured, some forced to flee. All of us are oppressed by poverty, cursed with execrations, wounded by slanders and treated in most shameful ways.³⁸

His letter reveals a proud indignation against injustice. It is an outstanding vindication for the oppressed and a reflection of the oppressors. The King must protect and restore the

³⁵ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la Parole*, p. 572

³⁶ *ICR* 1536 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 2. CO 1, 11: "Neque hic me privatam defensionem meditari existimes qua saluum in patriam reditum mihi conficiam, quam tametsi, quo decet humanitatis affectu prosequor, ut nunc tamen res sunt, ea non moleste careo. Terum communem piorum omnium, adeoque ipsam Christi causam complector, quae modis omnibus hodie in regno tuo proscissa ac protrita, velut deplorata iacet; Pharisaeorum id quidem quorundam tyrannide magis, quam tua conscientia."

³⁷ *ICR* 1536, p. 2. CO 1, 11. "Sed qui id fiat, hic dicere nihil attinet, afflicta certe iacet. Hoc enim profecerunt impii, ut Christi veritas si non ut fugata ac dissipata periret, certe ut sepulta et ignobilis lateat, pauperula vero Ecclesia, aut crudeli bus caedibus absumpta sit, aut exsiliis abacta, aut minis ac terroribus perculsa, ne hiscere quidem audeat. Et instant etiam num, qua solent insania et ferocitate, fortiter in parietem iam inclinatum, et ruinam quam fecerunt incumbentes."

³⁸ *ICR* 1536, p. 4. CO 1, 13: "Propter hanc spem (1 Tim. 4) alii nostrum vinculis constringuntur, alii virgis caeduntur, alii in ludibrium circumducuntur, alii proscribuntur, alii saevissime torquentur, alii fuga elabuntur, omnes rerum angustia premimur, diris execrationibus devovemur, maledictis laceramur, indignissimis modis tractamur."

inviolability and dignity of God's glory on earth, since in his office he is a servant of God's glory or else, a robber.³⁹ Like a competent attorney Calvin refuted all his opponents' criticisms in an orderly manner even as he fought to save what could be still be saved and to recuperate what could be recuperated. From this perspective then, this letter to the French King turns out to be "one of the few masterpieces of apologetic literature," as Williston Walker has asserted.⁴⁰

The second purpose, to provide new Christians with a basic understanding of Christian principles, was clearly stated, as he wrote:

When I first set my hand to this work, nothing was farther from my mind, most glorious King, than to write something that might afterward be offered to Your Majesty. My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness. And I undertook this labour especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I knew to be hungering and thirsting for Christ; but I saw very few who had been duly imbued with even a slight knowledge of him. The book itself witnesses that this was my intention, adapted as it is to a simple and, you may say, elementary form of teaching.⁴¹

³⁹ Calvin wrote: "It will then be for you, most serene King, not to close your ears or your mind to such just defence, especially when a very great question is at stake: how God's glory may be kept safe on earth, how God's truth may retain its place of honour, how Christ's Kingdom may be kept in good repair among us. Worthy indeed is this matter of your hearing, worthy of your cognizance, worthy of your royal throne! Indeed, this consideration makes a true king: to recognize himself a minister of God in governing his kingdom. Now, that king who in ruling over his realm does not serve God's glory exercises not kingly rule but brigandage." CO, 1 66

⁴⁰ W. Walker, *The Organizer of Reformation Protestantism, 1509-1564* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), p. 109

⁴¹ ICR 1536, p. 1. CO 01, 257: "Quum huic operi manum primum admoverem, nihil minus cogitabam, Rex clarissime, quam scribere quae maiestati tuae postea offerrentur. Tantum erat animus, rudimenta quaedam tradere, quibus formarentur ad veram pietatem qui aliquo religionis studio tanguntur. Atque hunc laborem

Following this premise, *The Institutes* were constructed as a basic catechetical manual, in six chapters, that, as John Hesselink notices, “followed closely the ordering of Luther’s Small Catechism.”⁴²

Yet the tragic events of 1536 changed Calvin’s plan to draft a simple catechism when he was prompted to address those, who, having left the Roman Catholic Church, asked: Who are those who belong to Christ? What is the nature of their membership? Calvin invited these people, who were excommunicated, even subjected to persecution, who represented the dregs of society, living in anxiety and despair, deprived of home and goods, in exile, to turn their eyes to God’s election, to His incomprehensible wisdom, rooted in His eternal purpose.

Moreover, since the church is the elect people of God, it cannot happen that those who are truly its members will ultimately perish or come to a bad end. For their salvation rests on such a sure and solid foundation, that even if the whole fabric of the world were to fall, salvation itself could not tumble or fall. It stands foremost with God’s election, neither will it change nor fail, unless in accordance with that eternal wisdom. Therefore they can be tossed and waver, even fall, but not contend against one another for the Lord’s supporting hand.⁴³

Gallis nostris potissimum desudabam, quorum permultos esurire et sitire Christum videbam, paucissimos, ¹⁾ qui vel modica eius cognitione rite imbuti essent. Hanc mihi fuisse propositam rationem liber ipse loquitur, ad simplicem scilicet rudemque docendi formam appositus.”

⁴² J. Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1992), p. 8

⁴³ *ICR* 1536, p. 59. CO 01, 73: “Cum autem ecclesia sit populus electorum Dei fieri non potest qui vere eius sunt membra tandem pereant, aut malo exitio perdantur. Nititur enim eorum salus tam certis solidisque fulcris ut, etiamsi totis orbis machina labefactor concidere ipsa et corruere non possit. rimum, stat cum Dei electione, nec nisi cum aeterna illa sapientia, variare aut deficere potest. Titubare ergo et fluctuari, cadere etiam possunt, sed non colliduntur, quia dominus supponit manum sua.”

In order to leave no doubt about the nature of this election, which was contradicted every day by the reality of brutal persecution, Calvin made explicit reference to the hidden and mysterious character of God's action by writing: "Indeed we cannot comprehend God's incomprehensible wisdom, nor is it in our power to investigate it so as to find out who, by his eternal plan, has been chosen, who condemned (Rom. 11:1-36)."⁴⁴

Further along in this passage Calvin issued a warning to those who, not content with God's revelation as manifested through Christ, "strive to penetrate God's mystery more deeply," saying that "they arouse God's wrath, because they would dare break into the depths of his majesty."⁴⁵ In chapter II, within the context of the exposition on the first part of the Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth," Calvin articulated clearly his opinion on election in the widest context of divine providence, writing:

When we call Him Almighty and Creator of all things, we must ponder such omnipotence as his whereby He works all things in all, and such providence whereby He regulates all things (I Cor. 12:6; Lam. 3:37-38)- not of the sort those Sophists fancy, empty, insensate, idle. By faith are we to be persuaded, that whatever happens to us, happy or sad, prosperous or adverse, comes to us from Him.⁴⁶

Calvin supported this point of view with a citation from the book of Job: "We should also

⁴⁴ *ICR* 1536, p. 59. CO 1, 74: "Comprehendere quidem non possumus incomprehensibilem Dei sapientiam, nec eam excutere nostrum est: ut nobis constet, qui aeterno eius consilio electi, qui reprobati sint."

⁴⁵ *ICR* 1536, p. 60. CO 1, 74: "Qui vero Christo non contenti, nituntur altius penetrare, iram Dei adversum se provocant, et quia in abyssum maiestatis eius irrumpunt, nihil possunt quam opprimi a gloria."

⁴⁶ *ICR* 1536, p. 49. CO 1, 63: "Cum vero omnipotentem et rerum omnium creatorem appellamus, talem eius omnipotentiam, qua omnia operatur in omnibus, talemque providentiam qua omnia moderatur, cogitare oportet (1 Cor.12. Thren. 3), non qualem illi Sophistae affingunt, inanem, sopitam, otiosam, ut fide persuasum habeamus, quaecunque nobis accidunt, laeta iuxta ac tristia, prospera ac adversa, sive ad corpus illa, sive ad animam pertineant, ab eo nobis evenire."

receive all adverse things with calm and peaceful hearts thinking that his providence looks after us and our salvation, while it is afflicting and oppressing us (Job 2:10).”⁴⁷

It is not possible to understand exactly what kind of idea Calvin had at that time in regards to the character of providence. Unarguably, this doctrine, which had already been taught by Bucer, had the purpose of strengthening practical Christian living rather than being a merely abstract explanation of God’s governance of the universe. Calvin, as had both Luther and the apostle Paul before him, discovered the enormous therapeutic power effected by the concept of election and providence. In fact, emphasis was laid on the assurance that God’s elect would not run the risk of being lost because God has taken it upon Himself to effect their salvation.

2.4 Geneva’s Catechism

If his response to the problems of the persecuted church could offer reassurances, and give her people the strength they needed to resist, it was doomed to invite other, sensitive questions. If the elect are such, inasmuch as they have been predestined by God, why are there people who don’t believe? If the election of God constitutes the cause of their salvation, is it not unavoidable to infer that the same election is therefore the cause of the rejection of others?

The problem, extremely delicate for its theological implications, was singled out as follows:

Just as the merciful Father offers us the Son through the word of the Gospel, so we embrace him through faith and acknowledge him as given to us. It is true that

⁴⁷ *ICR* 1536, p. 49. CO 1, 63: “Quasi ex eius manu suscipiamus, cogitantes eius providentiam sic quoque nobis ac saluti nostrae prospicere, dum affligit et tribulat.”

the word of the Gospel calls all to participate in Christ, but a number, blinded and hardened by unbelief, despise such a unique grace. Hence, only believers enjoy Christ; they receive Him as sent to them; they do not reject Him when He is given, but follow Him when he calls them.⁴⁸

Why does this happen? Is God unjust? Calvin resolutely denied the accusation that God could act unjustly by stating:

Beyond this contrast of attitudes of believers and unbelievers, the great secret of God's counsel must necessarily be considered. For, the seed of the word of God takes root and brings forth fruit only in those whom the Lord, by his eternal election, has predestined to be children and heirs of the heavenly kingdom. To all the others (who by the same counsel of God are rejected before the foundation of the world) the clear and evident preaching of truth can be nothing but an odor of death unto death. Now, why does the Lord use his mercy toward some and exercise the rigor of his judgment on the others? We have to leave the reason of this to be known by him alone. For, he, with a certainly excellent intention, has willed to keep it hidden from us all. The crudity of our mind could not indeed bear such a great clarity, nor our smallness comprehend such a great wisdom. And in fact all those who will attempt to rise to such a height and will not repress the temerity of their spirit, shall experience the truth of Solomon's saying (Prov. 25.27) that he who will investigate the majesty shall be oppressed by the glory.

Only let us have this resolved in ourselves that the dispensation of the Lord,

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1949), p. 37. CO 5, 332: "Quemadmodum filium suum evangelii verbo nobis offert misericors pater: ita fide ipsum amplectimur, ac quasi datum agnoscimus. Verbum quidem ipsum evangelii omnes in Christi participationem vocat: at plurimi incredulitate obcaecati et obdurati, tam singularem gratiani aspernantur. Soli ergo fideles Christo fruuntur, qui ad se missum recipiunt, qui sibi donatum non respuunt, qui vocantem sequuntur."

although hidden from us, is nevertheless holy and just. For, if he willed to ruin all mankind, he has the right to do it, and in those whom he rescues from perdition one can contemplate nothing but his sovereign goodness. We acknowledge, therefore, the elect to be recipients of his mercy (as truly they are) and the rejected to be recipients of his wrath, a wrath, however, which is nothing but just.⁴⁹

In other words, reasons for the perdition of many depend upon the inscrutability of God's decision. Calvin anticipated here the basic lines of God's defense which he would expand more extensively in the years to follow. He linked the notion of divine prerogative to an established doctrine of predestination with the words "the great secret of God's counsel," adding a concept which also had played a significant role in the book of Job, that is, that the divine "modus operandi" is unintelligible to us, not only because of our "hebetudo," or because our natural incapacity makes us unable to understand reality "sub specie aeternitatis," but because "God has willed that his purposes remain hidden from us all."⁵⁰

In addition to these passages, one can find other texts stressing once again the noetic limitations of human mind. No one, is capable of comprehending, wrote Calvin,

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, p. 38. CO 05, 333: "In hoc autem discrimine sublime divini consilii arcanum necessario considerandum est. In his enim solis demum verbi Dei semen radicem ducit, ac fructificat, quos Dominus sibi filios regnique coelestishaeredes, aeterna sua electione, praedestinavit: reliquis omnibus, qui eodem Dei consilio, ante mundi constitutionem, reprobati sunt, clarissima veritatis praedicatio nihil quam odor mortis in mortem esse potest. Porro cur illos misericordia sua Dominus dignetur, in hos iudicii sui severitatem exerceat, rationem penes illum esse sinamus, quam nos omnes, nec sine optima ratione, celatos esse voluit. Non enim vel tantam lucem ingenii nostri hebetudo ferre, vel tantam sapientiae magnitudinem tenuta capere valeat. Ac omnino quicumque se hic attollere contendunt, nec cohibere mentis suae temeritatem sustinebunt, verum esse experientur quod ait Solomon: Scrutatorem maiestatis oppressum iri a gloria (Prov. 25, 2). 1) Tantum id nobiscum statuamus, illam Domini dispensationem, tametsi occulta nobis est, iustam nihilominus et sanctam esse. Nam si universum hominum genus perderet, id faceret iure suo. In iis quos a perditione revocat, nil nisi summam eius bonitatem contemplari licet. Electos ergo vasa esse misericordiae ipsius, us sunt, agnoscamus: reprobos, vasa irae, sed non nisi iustae."

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, p. 38

the heavenly secrets of God⁵¹ unless he is illuminated by faith, which is “a unique and precious gift of God.”⁵² Calvin continued, “Our thought is blind” and “faith greatly surpasses all the power of our nature,”⁵³ God is lofty, mighty, incomprehensible,”⁵⁴ and “His marvelous majesty cannot be comprehended by our rudeness.”⁵⁵

2.5 *The Institutes of Christian Religion of 1539*

The connection of the doctrines of providence and predestination with the concept of Divine Hiddenness which Calvin touched upon in the *Institutes* (1536) found greater expression in the 1539 edition of *The Institutes*,⁵⁶ which tripled in length. Believing that he had not assigned sufficient importance to these themes, Calvin decided to devote an independent section, Chapter 8, to Predestination and Providence.

In this edition, Calvin returned once again to the problem that had afflicted him previously: Why do people have different reactions to the Gospel? He answered this question by resorting explicitly to the idea of the Hiddenness of God, saying:

Or ce que l'Alliance de vie n'est pas également prêchée à tout le monde, et même ou elle est prêchée, n'est pas également reçue de tous, en ceste diversité apparaît

⁵¹ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, p. 40. CO 5, 334: “cœlestia Dei mysteria.”

⁵² Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, p. 41

⁵³ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, p. 40

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, p. 60. CO 5, 346: “potens, sublimis, incomprehensibilis.”

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, p. 59. CO 5, 345: “Eius maiestas, quam aliter mens nostra, pro sua crassitate, concipere non potest, designata est, quia coelo nihil augustius.”

⁵⁶ *Œuvres Complètes de Calvin, Institution de la Religion Chrétienne* (Paris: Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1961) [cited hereafter as *IRC*].

un secret admirable du Jugement de Dieu.⁵⁷ Or si c'est chose évidente, que cela se fait par le vouloir de Dieu, que le salut soit offert aux uns, et les autres en soient forclos, de cela sortent grandes et hautes questions, lesquelles ne se peuvent autrement résoudre qu'en enseignant les fidèles de ce qu'ils doivent tenir de l'élection et prédestination de Dieu.⁵⁸ Nous appelons Prédestination le conseil éternel de Dieu, par lequel il a déterminé ce qu'il voulait faire d'un chacun homme. Car il ne les crée pas tous en pareille condition, mais ordonne les uns à vie éternelle, les autres à l'éternelle damnation. Ainsi selon la fin à laquelle est créé l'homme, nous disons qu'il est prédestiné à mort ou à la vie.⁵⁹

Fully aware that this perspective on the doctrine of predestination might awaken people's curiosity but not their respect, Calvin warned the curious, emphasizing once again the secret character of the Divine Will. He noted that the divine concept of predestination was nothing if not a mystery.

Premièrement donc qu'il leur souvienne que quand ils enquièrent de la prédestination, ils entrent au sanctuaire de la sagesse divine; auquel si quelqu'un se fourre et ingère en trop grand confiance et hardiesse, il n'atteindra jamais là de pouvoir rassasier sa curiosité ; et entrera en un Labyrinthe, ou il ne trouvera nulle issue. Car ce n'est pas raison que les choses que Dieu a voulu être cachées et dont il s'est retenu la connaissance, soient ainsi épluchées des hommes; et que la

⁵⁷ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 57. CO 1, 861: "Iam vero quod non apud omnes peraeque hominibus foedus vitae praedicatur, et apud eos quibus praedicatur non eundem locum perpetuo reperit, in ea diversitate mirabilis divini iudicii altitudo se profert."

⁵⁸ This definition of predestination remained unchanged up to the final edition.

⁵⁹ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 62. CO 1, 865: "Praedestinationem vocamus aeternum Dei decretum, quo apud se constitutum habuit quid de unoquoque homine fieri vellet. Non enim pari conditione creantur omnes; sed aliis vita aeterna, aliis damnatio aeterna praeordinatur. Itaque prout in alterutrum finem quisque conditus est, ita vel ad vitam, vel ad mortem praedestinatum dicimus."

hautesse de sa sapience, laquelle il a voulu être plutôt adorée de nous, qu’être comprise, soit assujettie au sens humain, pour la chercher jusques à son éternité.⁶⁰

Consequently, he said, “je désire d’impêtrer des tous homes en général que nous ne cherchions point les choses que Dieu a voulu être cachées.”⁶¹

This foreshadows what Calvin then developed in a more organic way in the last edition (1559) of his *opus magnum* *The Institutes*:

La volonté de Dieu est tellement la règle suprême et souveraine de justice, que tout ce qu’il veut, il le faut tenir pour juste, d’autant qu’il le veut. Pourtant quand on demande: pourquoi est ce que Dieu a fait ainsi? Il faut répondre: Parce qu’Il l’a voulu. Si on passe outre, en demandant: pourquoi l’a Il voulu? C’est demander une chose plus grande et plus haute que la volonté de Dieu; ce qui ne se peut trouver.⁶²

He continues:

La justice de Dieu est plus haute et excellente, que de devoir être réduite à la mesure humaine, ou être coprinced en la petitesse de l’entendement des hommes. Il confesse bien, que le Jugements de Dieu ont une profondeur, laquelle peut abimer les entendements de tout le monde, s’ils veulent entre jusques là.⁶³

Calvin warned all those who would question the hidden justice of God with these words:

“Qui estes vous, pauvres misérables, qui intentez accusation contre Dieu? N’ayans autre

⁶⁰ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 58. CO 1, 862: “Primum ergo meminerint, in praedestinationem dum inquirunt, se in divinae sapientiae adyta penetrare, quo si quis secure ac confidenter prorumpat, nec quo suam curiositatem satiet assequatur, et labyrinthum ingredietur cuius nullum reperiet exitum. Neque enim aequum est, ut quae in se ipso abscondita esse voluit Dominus impune homo excutiat, et sapientiae sublimitatem, quam adorari et non apprehendi voluit, ut per ipsam quoque admirabilis nobis foret ab ipsa aternitate evolvat.”

⁶¹ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 61. CO 1 862: “Tantum illud in universum obtinere apud eos cupio, ut quae in occulto recondite Dominus reliquit ne scrutemur.”

⁶² *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 73

⁶³ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 75

cause sinon pource qu'il n'a point abaissée la grandeur des ses œuvres à votre rudesse, comme si ce qu'il fait était inique, d'autant qu'il il nous cache?"⁶⁴

Calvin held that there are mysteries which cannot be understood therefore one must rely upon the concept of Divine Hiddenness. Our existence is compassed by a great many questions. If we had no recourse to the idea of Divine Hiddenness these questions would be absolutely unanswerable. For example, why did more than four thousand years passed between the Fall and the revelation of Christ? Calvin answered by saying: "Si quelqu'un veut ici chercher raison plus haute que le conseil secret et occulte de Dieu, il se tourmentera en vain."⁶⁵

Or why is it that among a hundred people who hear a sermon, only twenty accept its teaching? Even in this case, Calvin's answer was: "cela est cachée en Lui."⁶⁶

With his revisions, Calvin was also particularly careful to uphold the notion of human liberty, which had seemed imperilled by writings in his previous tracts. In his opinion, Christian teaching on providence should preserve two basic paradoxical elements: God is omnipotent and humans are free. As Strong rightly pointed out: "Dieu fait tout; Il est le Souverain absolu, mai l'homme reste néanmoins responsable de ses actés."⁶⁷ Calvin stressed on one hand "la prédestination n'est autre chose que l'ordre et dispensation de la justice divine, laquelle ne laisse point d'être irrépréhensible, combine

⁶⁴ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 76

⁶⁵ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 101

⁶⁶ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 102

⁶⁷ A. Strong, "La pensée de Calvin sur la Providence Divine au temps ou il était refuge à Strasbourg", *Revue d'Histoire et de philosophie* 22 (1942), p. 159

qu'elle soit occulte,"⁶⁸ and on the other hand, the condemnation of evildoers "procède tellement de la prédestination de Dieu que la cause et matière en sera trouvée en eux."⁶⁹

In order to avoid sterile discussion on this issue, one should, in Calvin's opinion, "contemplate the corruption of human nature, rather than search out the causes of damnation in light of the doctrine of predestination, since, ultimately, God's will is secret and incomprehensible."⁷⁰ It was while attempting to resolve the sensitive question of election (que "le Seigneur tiens cachée en soy")⁷¹ that Calvin was induced to direct further attention to the notion of providence. Contrary to the Stoics, who tended to identify God with natural processes, Calvin held that divine providence had nothing to do with nature but lay hidden in God's counsel.⁷² God acts in nature and in history but is separate from them.

While reading his former work, one might conclude that his teaching on divine providence echoed the stoic perspective, so in the first edition of *The Institutes* Calvin took special care to distinguish the Christian understanding of providence from the Stoic's interpretation. Far from being a philosophical theory, or a conclusion drawn from life experience, Calvin held that providence is known only through faith. It is not a matter

⁶⁸ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 79. CO 01, 874. "Praedestinatio nihil aliud est quam divinae iustitiae, occultae quidem sed inculpatae, dispensatio."

⁶⁹ *IRC*, vol. 3, p. 79

⁷⁰ CO 01, 874. "Quare in corrupta potius umani generis natura evidentem damnationis causam contemplemur, quam absconditam ac penitus incomprehensibilem inquiramus in Dei praedestinatione."

⁷¹ *IRC*, Vol. 3, p. 86

⁷² CO 1, 891. "Quondam tamen imbecillitas nostra providentia Dei altitudini succumbit, adibita distinctione, illam quoque sublevabo. Dicam igitur, uteunque Dei dispensatione omnia ordinantur, nobis tamen esse fortuita. Sed quondam eorum quae eveniunt ordo, ratio, finis, necessitas, ut plurimum in Dei consilio latet, et humana opinione non apprehenditur, quasi fortuita sunt, quae certum est ex Dei voluntate provenire."

of rationalization, but rather a confession of faith.⁷³ In light of this perspective, his teachings on providence had a therapeutic effect rather than being the results of theological systematization. B.A. Gerrish hit the mark, when he aptly pointed out: “Calvin’s doctrine of providence, so far from being inferred from the visible tokens of God’s presence, was in fact developed despite God’s Hiddenness.”⁷⁴

Calvin could not have developed such a perspective, without taking into account these gnosiological problems: under what conditions is it possible to know God; and what is the relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves? It is not fortuitous that *The Institutes*, from the first edition to that last, begin with the category “Knowledge,” and not with speculations about the essence of God. “Toute la somme de nôtre sagesse, laquelle mérite d’être appelée et certaine sagesse, est quasi comprise en deux parties, à savoir la connaissance de Dieu et ne nous mêmes.”⁷⁵

Calvin’s most pervasive principle was that of the relationship between God and man. In theology everything ought to be related to God. Otherwise the word “knowledge” is reduced to noetic meaning. It implies the possibility of one being able to understand the *modus operandi* of God, rather than apprehending His way of being or His essence, as Calvin pointed out:

⁷³ In this regard E. Saxer pointed out: “Dabei ist charakteristisch, dass nicht mehr die Vorsehungslehre als ein dogmatischer Paragraph betrachtet und dessen Einordnung in ein Gedankensystem Calvins versucht wird. Es wird dabei vielmehr sichtbar, wie der Vorsehungsglaube als eine Art Lebelement das ganze Denken Calvins durchzieht und eine genaue Entsprechung zu dem schon immer festgestellten Grundmotiv der Ehre Gottes als letztem Ziel Geschehens bildet.” In *Vorsehung und Verheißung Gottes* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980), p. 22

⁷⁴ “To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 142

⁷⁵ It is worth noting the different formulation given to this statement. The formula used in the edition of 1536 ‘the sum of the holy doctrine’, was enlarged in the following editions of the Institutes with that one ‘the sum of our wisdom’, In such a way this statement became the hermeneutical principle of the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

Et faut ici observer, que nous sommes convoyez à une connaissance de Dieu qui ne gist point seulement en vaine spéculation, mail laquelle est utile et fructueuse, si elle est un fois comprise de nous. Car Dieu nous est manifesté par ses œuvres, desquelles quand nous sentons la force en nous, et en recevons le profit, il est nécessaire que nous soyons touchez plus au vif d'une telle connaissance, que si nous imaginions Dieu en l'air, sans en avoir en nous le sentiment par expérience.⁷⁶

Knowledge of God has nothing to do with the tendency to over-intellectualise the Christian faith, but, for Calvin, takes on an experiential character, as Bernard Cottret pointed out.⁷⁷

Certes trois choses nous sont principalement nécessaires à connaitre : sa miséricorde, en laquelle consiste le salut de nous tous; son jugement, lequel journallement il exerce sur les iniques, et lequel il leur réserve plus rigoureux à confusion éternelle; sa justice, par laquelle ses fidèles sont bénignement entretenus. Néanmoins en cela faisant, n'est pas omise ne sa puissance, ne sa vérité, ne sa sainteté, ne sa bonté.⁷⁸

But how is it possible to reach a saving knowledge of God? In responding to this question Calvin was adamant:

Car nous avons à estimer que la lumière de Dieu, laquelle est nommée par l'Apôtre inaccessible, nous est comme un Labyrinthe pour nous perdre, sinon que

⁷⁶ *IRC*, Vol. 1, p. 56

⁷⁷ Cottret, *Calvin, a Biography*, p. 312

⁷⁸ *IRC*, Vol. 1, p. 78

par l'adresse de la parole nous y soyons conduits. Nous avons la seule écriture, en laquelle il a plu à Dieu de coucher sa vérité à l'éternelle mémoire.⁷⁹

The Scriptures reveals to us, in fact, what we must and can know about God, but it does not exhaust God's mystery. It describes God, not in regards to His inner life, but as He reveals Himself to us. It was in reflecting upon this that Calvin resorted for the first time to a principle which represented the theological presupposition of Divine Hiddenness, namely the distinction between what God has revealed to us and what remains hidden in Him, between God, as He is in Himself and the God of revelation.

The incomprehensibility of God is due not only to our "imbecillitas" and to the weakness of our understanding which is incapable of grasping how God in a dialectical way can both will and not will that a thing should happen, but also due to the incomplete character of His revelation, as Calvin pointed out:

Enquoy nous avons à considérer que son éternité et son Essence résident en luy même est annoncée par ce nom, qui Lui est attribué en premier lieu, lequel est deux fois répété en Hébreu; en après que ses vertus nous sont commémorées, par lesquels il nous est démontré non pas quel is est en soymesme, mais tel qu'il ets envers nous.⁸⁰

In other words, since we cannot know God in His essence, it is pointless to ask *Quis est Deus?* His essence is so incomprehensible that His majesty is hidden, remote from all our senses.

⁷⁹ IRC, Vol. 1, p. 64

⁸⁰ IRC, Vol. 1, p. 77. CO 1, 304: "non quis sit apud se sed qualis erga nos."

Although the nature of God “soit incompréhensible et cache à l’intelligence humaine,”⁸¹ Calvin was fully convinced that God “a engrave en un chacun des ces œuvres certains signes de sa majesté, par lesquels Il se donne a connaitre à nous selon notre petite capacité. “Parquoy combien que son essence nous soit occulte, néanmoins ses vertus, lesquelles apparaissent assiduellement devant nos jeux, le démontrent tel qu’il nous est expédient de la cognoistre pour notre salut.”⁸²

There is here “in nuce” that notion of accommodation that was fully developed in his following works. And yet, the signs through which God reveals Himself also work as concealment, since they preserve the incomprehensibility of His deep essence, therefore Calvin repeatedly warned against “la outrecuydance des hommes, que mesurent la grandeur de Dieu selon la rudesse de leurs sens e ne le comprennent point telqu’il se donne a cognoistre, mail l’imagnet comme ilz l’ont forge.”⁸³

2.6 *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*

In autumn of 1539, simultaneously with the appearance of the second edition of *The Institutes*, Calvin’s *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans* was published.

Succinctness and clarity were the main features of this work which might be regarded as the first watershed of independence in Calvin’s Reformation. In the light of the most important principle of the Protestant Reformation, that is to say, “justification by faith,”

⁸¹ *IRC*, Vol. 1, p. 51

⁸² *IRC*, Vol. 1, p. 51. CO 1, 286: “Nam quum sit natura incomprehensibilis, et ab humana intelligentia procul absconditus, certas suae maiestatis notas, quibus, pro tenuitatis nostrae modulo, comprehendi queat, singulis suis operibus impressit: sed adeo claras et illustres, ut sublata sit, quamlibet caecis ac stupidis, ignorantiae excusatio. Ergo utcunque eius essentia lateat, virtutes tamen, quae assidue nobis obversantur, talem delineant, qualem a nobis ipsum percipi, salutis nostrae interest.”

⁸³ *IRC*, Vol. 1, p. 47

Calvin had the opportunity to focus on the question that would continue to interest him: How it was possible to reconcile the righteousness of man with the righteousness of God?

The defence of God's justice was the first concern of the French Reformer. He asked himself: Is there unrighteousness with God?⁸⁴ The answer was unequivocal:

With regard to the elect, God cannot be charged with any unrighteousness; for according to his good pleasure he favours them with mercy: and yet even in this case the flesh finds reasons for murmuring, for it cannot concede to God the right of showing favour to one and not to another, except the cause be made evident. As then it seems unreasonable that some should without merit be preferred to others, the petulancy of men quarrels with God, as though he deferred to persons more than what is right.⁸⁵

In the *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans* Calvin refers to some points that were elaborated upon in the last version of the Institutes, that is to say:

- 1) Predestination as established by God is a "labyrinth,"⁸⁶ from which the human mind can by no means extricate itself.
- 2) The only way to explore the question of predestination is through considering what "Scripture teaches us."⁸⁷
- 3) "The salvation or the perdition of men depends on God's free election."⁸⁸
- 4) At the basis of predestination lies "the secret will of God"⁸⁹ and His secret counsel.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), p. 354

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 355

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 445

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 354

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 355

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 355

Calvin offered this conclusion:

It hence follows, that it is in vain to contend with him, as though he were bound to give a reason; for he of himself comes forth before us, and anticipates the objection, by declaring, that the reprobate, through whom he designs his name to be made known, proceed from the hidden fountain of his providence.⁹¹

What is also remarkable in this work is the extensive recourse to adjectives that turn the reader's attention toward God's incomprehensibility.⁹²

2.7 *Against the fantastic and furious Sect of the Libertines*

In this treatise,⁹³ often overlooked by scholars, Calvin tried to differentiate between his view on God's providence and that of the Libertines,⁹⁴ who asserted that "God is the spiritual nature that indwells man"⁹⁵ and "causes everything."⁹⁶ Calvin maintained that this pantheistic determinism had at least three deadly consequences:

The first is that if this is the case there would be no difference whatsoever

between God and the devil, as in fact the God whom they invent for us is an idol

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 365

⁹¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 361

⁹² The words *hidden*, *secret* and *incomprehensible* recur respectively, 32, 56 and 8 times.

⁹³ In John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, Benjamin Farley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1982), pp. 161-326

⁹⁴ Calvin regarded the sect of Libertines more pernicious than the papists, by saying: "Since I can only edify the church of God by fighting against those who machinate to destroy it, I would be cheating myself if, to the best of my ability, I were to discredit the pope and his accomplices, but should pardon those who are by far the more serious enemies of God and the greatest spoilers of His truth. For even the pope retains some form of religion. He does not remove hope in eternal life. He teaches the fear of God. He observes some distinction between good and evil. He recognizes our Lord Jesus as true God and true man. He attributes authority to the Word of God. But the goal of Quintin and his gang is to turn heaven and earth upside down, to annihilate all religion, to efface all knowledge of human understanding, to deaden consciences, and to leave no distinction between men and beasts." Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 204

⁹⁵ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 231

⁹⁶ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 240

worse than the devil of hell. The second is that men would no longer have a conscience for abstaining from evil, but like beasts would follow their sensual appetites, without any discretion. The third is that we would be unable to make any judgments, for it would be necessary to find everything good, whether lechery, murder, or stealing, and the worst crimes that we can imagine would have to be viewed as laudable works.⁹⁷

By way of contrast Calvin emphasized the goodness of God, arguing that His freedom could never be separated from His goodness, nor His goodness from His power. Although it may be difficult, or even impossible, for our limited human perception to understand what good God is accomplishing in the works of the wicked, Calvin maintained that God rules over history despite, and even through, human wickedness. In the attempt to make clear, once and for all, the idea that the divine providence of God didn't exclude or limit human responsibility, for the first time, and in a very systematic way, Calvin articulated three essential ways in which divine providence worked. This insight would play an important role in the subsequent development of his thought.

The first aspect of providential activity is universal providence "by which He guides all creatures according to the condition and propriety which He had given each when He made them."⁹⁸ According to Calvin God's "universal operation does not prevent each creature, heavenly or earthly, from having and retaining its own quality and nature and from following its own inclination."⁹⁹ The second aspect can be understood as the special providence by which God "operates in His creatures" in order that they "serve His

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 241

⁹⁸ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 242

⁹⁹ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 243

goodness, righteousness, and judgment.”¹⁰⁰ Calvin, recognizing that God acts in the bad deeds of the evildoers, stressed two essential points. The first point is that God doesn’t work “in an iniquitous man as if he were a stone or a piece of wood, but He uses him as a thinking creature, according to the quality of his nature which He has given him.”¹⁰¹ Satan and the wicked are completely free and their freedom does not limit God’s freedom. God does not violate the freedom of the evildoers, although He works in and through their actions.

The second point of this concept of providential operation at work within his creatures is that, although the works of God and those of the wicked might appear to be similar, there is an enormous difference between them, as Calvin stresses:

For the wicked man is motivated either by his avarice, or ambition, or envy, or cruelty to do what he does, and he disregards any other end. Consequently, according to the root which motivated his heart and the end toward which he strives, his work is qualified and with good reason is judged bad. But God’s intention is completely different. For His aim is to exercise His justice for the salvation and preservation of good, to pour out His goodness and grace on His faithful, and to chastise those who need it. Hence that is how we ought to distinguish between God and men; by separating in the same work His justice, His goodness, and His judgment from the evil of both the devil and the ungodly.¹⁰²

In order to support his point of view Calvin quoted the vicissitudes of Job: “When Job received news of the loss of his goods, of the death of his children, and of all those

¹⁰⁰ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 243

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 245

¹⁰² Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 246

calamities that befell him, he acknowledged that it was God who was visiting him, saying, “The Lord has given me all these and takes them away” (Job 1:21).¹⁰³ The significance of this evaluation of the intentions which are behind every fact should not be underestimated. Calvin resumed this theme some years later when he tackled the problem of justifying God’s action in his *Sermons on Job*.

The third aspect of providential activity is evidenced by the fact that God governs His faithful; living and reigning in them by His Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁴ The evil we do results from our natural corruption, while our will to do good is the outcome of the natural grace of His Spirit. Far from destroying human freedom, God forms and preserves it in spite of sin; God fulfils it in regeneration. How does this treatise fit in the widest context of Calvin’s development of the concept of Divine Hiddenness? It actually bears little relation, because in it the French Reformer was more interested in reconciling God’s omnipotence with human liberty, than deepening the dimensions of God’s Hiddenness. This is the reason why the references to God’s Hiddenness are scattered and few.¹⁰⁵ Yet the treatise is very important if one considers the developments Calvin makes when vindicating God’s justice in relation to the presence of Evil.

2.8 The “somber years”

¹⁰³ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 246

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 247

¹⁰⁵ “One might ask if we can ever do anything against God’s will. I think not. But the whole of the matter is that we ought not inquire into His providence, which is a secret to us, since we know what He wants of us and what He approves and condemns.” *Treatises against Anabaptists and Libertines*, p. 253

During the period 1547 to 1555, which B. Cottret termed “the somber years,”¹⁰⁶ Calvin, more than any other time in his life, faced severe personal difficulties as well as experiencing the continued agonies of the persecuted church. “There are so many obstacles and hindrances in the world and so many infirmities in our flesh,”¹⁰⁷ he wrote to Lady Anne Seymour, and some years later he confessed to Melanchthon that

in addition to the very great troubles with which I am so sorely consumed, there is almost no day on which some new pain or anxiety does not occur. I should, therefore, be in a short time entirely overcome by the load of evils under which I am oppressed, did not the Lord by his own means alleviate their severity.¹⁰⁸

His grievances were well-founded. His wife Idelette de Bure, after a long and painful illness, died on 29 March 1549. The situation in Geneva had become more and more difficult, reaching a point where Calvin couldn’t help being “displeased with the present state of our republic.”¹⁰⁹ The persecution of the Protestants reached its apex. All these sad events prompted him to take a firm stand; and he sought to encourage, exhort and strengthen all those who were in despair.

In one letter dated on 8th January 1549 he exhorted Madame de Cany to offer a courageous and honest profession of the truth, despite the murmuring and threatening that it might evoke. He wrote:

We can appreciate the honour he confers upon us in making use of our service to maintain his so precious truth, we shall hold it to be a peculiar advantage, rather than be annoyed on account of it. True it is, that the human understanding cannot

¹⁰⁶ Cottret, *Calvin a Biography*, p. 182

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 237

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 376

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 298

apprehend that; but, seeing that the infallible wisdom of God pronounces, that those who are persecuted for the testimony of the Gospel are most happy, at all hazards we must needs acquiesce in that judgment. Furthermore, let us take to ourselves the example of the Apostles, who counted the reproach of the world as a great honour, and even gloried in it. In short, let us never think that we have fully received the truth, if we do not prefer, above all worldly triumphs, to right under the banner of our Lord Jesus, that is to say, to bear his cross.¹¹⁰

There is a similar exhortation in a letter sent on 10th June 1549 to Madame de la Roche Posay, when Calvin reminds her: “Howbeit, you must remember, that wherever we may go, the cross of Jesus Christ will follow us, even in the place where you may enjoy your ease and comforts.”¹¹¹

In a letter written on 19th of January 1551, recognizing that the triumphs of Jesus Christ are despised and reproached by the world, while the wicked are glorifying themselves in their pride, Calvin invited Richard Le Fevre “to think upon that immortal glory which has purchased for us to the end that you may be able to endure in patience the afflictions, wherein you are.”¹¹²

A letter dated January 1550, and addressed to the Protector, Monseigneur Somerset, anticipated a theme that the Reformer would develop more extensively in his *Sermons on Job*, namely that God always had good reasons for chastening His people:

However, Monsignor, you have also to consider that if God has been pleased to humble you for a little while, it has not been without a motive. For although you

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 202

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 230

¹¹² Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, pp. 291-292

might be innocent in regard to men, you know that before this great heavenly Judge there is no one living who is not chargeable. Thus, then, it is that the saints have honoured the rod of God, by yielding their neck, and bowing low their head under his discipline. David had walked very uprightly, but yet he confessed that it had been good for him to be humbled by the hand of God. For which reason, as soon as we feel any chastisement, of whatsoever kind it may be, the first step should be to retire into ourselves, and well to examine our own lives, that we may apprehend those blessings which had been hidden from us: for sometimes too much prosperity so dazzles our eyes, that we cannot perceive wherefore God chastises us.¹¹³

The acceptance of, and acquiescence to, the providence of God is part of one's service to God. An explanation of the hidden providence of God concluded the letter sent to the Ministers of Switzerland on October 1551 when Calvin stated:

Finally, this much is fixed and conceded by us all, that when man sins, God must not be regarded as having any share in the blame, nor that the word sin can in any sense be applied to him. Yet this does not hinder him from exercising his power, in a wonderful and incomprehensible way, through Satan and the wicked, as if they were the instruments of his wrath, to teach the faithful patience, or to inflict merited punishment on his enemies. This profane trifler cries out that we bring an impeachment against God when we allege that he governs all things by his providence; destroying, in short, in this way, all distinction between causes as remote and concealed, on the one hand, and as near and patent on the other;

¹¹³ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, pp. 259-260

rendering it impossible to regard the sufferings to which holy Job was subjected as the work of God, but that he may be held as equally guilty with the Devil, the Chaldeans, and the Sabaeen robbers.¹¹⁴

Among the events that particularly troubled the Reformer were the agonies of the persecuted church. In the years between 1549 and 1555, the persecution against those who supported the Reformation intensified not only in Paris, but also in the provinces. Places of execution arose everywhere as if the King wished to remove the memory of an edict which he had issued on behalf of the Vaudois of Provence. In a letter written to Bullinger on 15th October 1551, the Reformer lamented that in order “to gain new modes of venting his rage against the people of God, the King has been issuing atrocious edicts, by which the general prosperity of the kingdom is broken up. A right of appeal to the supreme courts hitherto has been, and still is, granted to persons guilty of poisoning, of forgery, and of robbery; yet this is denied to Christians: they are condemned by the ordinary judges to be dragged straight to the flames, without any liberty of appeal.”¹¹⁵ The “firmness of the martyr”¹¹⁶ and “his miserable condition”¹¹⁷ impressed Calvin so much that he spent much of his time helping refugees in the city, and writing letters of comfort and encouragement to Christian people who were in hopeless situations abroad. In this way, the Doctrine of Providence was contextualized, for it was intended to communicate hope and comfort.

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 325

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 320. See also the letter to Oswald Myconius written on November 1551, in *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 326

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 244

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 342

In a series of letters written to five prisoners of Lyons the Reformer made reference to all the most important elements of his defence of God. In the first letter dated on 10th July 1552, he reminded them of their vocation, stressing the fact that God “will give you strength to fulfil His work, for He has promised this, and we know by experience that He has never failed those who allow themselves to be governed by Him.”¹¹⁸ The same recommendation was echoed in a letter written on 7th March 1552.¹¹⁹

It was only when it was clear that every effort to save them had failed, that Calvin was induced to abandon hope. Openly addressing them in the letter, he wrote, “turn your whole mind heavenward.” He continued:

But since it appears as though God would use your blood to sign his truth, there is nothing better than for you to prepare yourselves to that end, beseeching him so to subdue you to his good pleasure, that nothing may hinder you from following whithersoever he shall call. For you know, my brothers, that it behoves us to be thus mortified, in order to be offered to him in sacrifice.¹²⁰

The idea that the true believers in this world suffered far more grievously than the wicked who abused and oppressed them took hold of Calvin gradually. It is worth noting that in these letters which were written just before his *Sermons on Job*, Calvin perceived more and more clearly the one particular element which he would develop in his sermons, namely the eschatological dimension of Christian hope. “God will have a horrible

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 350

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 391

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 405

punishment prepared for such as have despised his majesty with such enormous pride, and have cruelly persecuted those who call purely upon his name.”¹²¹

In a last letter, Calvin sent his assurances to the Prisoners of Lyon:

Seeing that God has promised us victory in the end, do not doubt, that as he has imparted a measure of his strength, so you will have more ample evidence in future, that he does not make a beginning only to leave his work imperfect, as it is said in the Psalm.¹²²

Even though, he admitted,

it is strange, to human reason, that the children of God should be so surfeited with afflictions, while the wicked disport themselves in delights; but even more so, that the slaves of Satan should tread us under foot, as we say, and triumph over us, however, we have wherewith to comfort ourselves in all our miseries, looking for that happy issue which is promised to us, that he will not only deliver us by his angels, but will himself wipe away the tears from our eyes.¹²³

In the months just before the drafting of his *Sermons on Job* the situation came to a head, as Calvin wrote to Bullinger: “the church is everywhere variously agitated, at Geneva it is tossed about by as many opposing as Noah’s ark was during the deluge.”¹²⁴ Even at this time Calvin didn’t stand down. He insisted “that if Jesus Christ spared not himself for our salvation, it is not reasonable that our lives should be deemed more

¹²¹ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 407

¹²² Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 412

¹²³ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 413

¹²⁴ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 6, p. 20

precious than his. And indeed if we desire to be exalted to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must bear the opprobrium of his cross.”¹²⁵

All these sad events, which occurred before Calvin could write his *Sermons on Job*, only increased his deep conviction in the incomprehensibility of God and the contingency of human life. His anxiety, as Bouwsma¹²⁶ aptly pointed out, found ample expression in his theological writings and in his correspondences, and prompted him to build up his theological defence of God. A first attempt in this direction was made when Calvin wrote the “*Quatre Sermons traitant de matieres fort utiles pour notre temps.*” As Ariste Viguié wrote, in these sermons

il semble que le style ait quelque chose de plus nerveux et de plus métallique. La parole se ressent de la majesté terrible du sujet. Dans les deux derniers sermons éclatent une ironie, une véhémence amère contre le malheureux qui, étant dans l’Église de Dieu, la déshonorent par leur indifférence ou leurs lâchetés frivoles.¹²⁷

And yet although this collection of sermons was “une rude et forte expression de la pensée de Calvin, à un moment tragique de l’histoire de la reforme,” they did not offer,” S. Schreiner affirms, “consolation and courage to the faithful,” as did his *Sermons on Job*.¹²⁸

2.9 De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione (1552)

It was in the year 1552 that Calvin was able to develop his intuitions more systematically

¹²⁵ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 6, p. 23

¹²⁶ Bouwsma, *John Calvin: a Sixteenth Century Portrait*, Chapter 2, pp 32-48

¹²⁷ *Les Sermons de Calvin sur le livre de Job*, Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français (1882), p. 471. I owe this reference to Susan Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be found* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) p. 7

¹²⁸ Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be found*, p. 7

while concentrating his attention on the notion of the eternal predestination of God.

The impetus for writing this treatise arose from reading a book by the theologian, Albert Pighius, who, in Calvin's opinion "attempted, at the same time, and in the same book, to establish the free-will of man and to subvert the secret counsel of God, by which He chooses some for salvation and appoints others to eternal destruction."¹²⁹ According to Calvin, the essence of Pighius' writing and that of another Catholic theologian, George (named "the Sicilian"), could be understood in the following way, that

it lies in each one's own liberty, whether he will become a-partaker of the grace of adoption or not; and that it does not depend on the counsel and decree of God who are elect and who are reprobate; but that each one determines for himself the one state or the other by his own will, and with respect to the fact that some believe the Gospel, while others remain in unbelief; that this difference does not arise from the free election of God, nor from His secret counsel, but from the will of each individual.¹³⁰

Calvin resolutely rejected such a point of view, analyzing all the texts dealing with this theme and once again making reference to God's inscrutability by using terms like "secret," "hidden," "concealed," "incomprehensible," not only applied to providence, election and predestination, but also to the entire spectrum of the "modus operandi" of God. "The fountain of that eternal counsel of God,"¹³¹ "His eternal counsel,"¹³² "the life

¹²⁹ Homer C. Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1996), p. 25

¹³⁰ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 25

¹³¹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 46, 58

¹³² Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 46, p. 94

of the believers,”¹³³ “the reason for His works,”¹³⁴ “the will of God,”¹³⁵ “the reason why God does not reveal His arm equally to all,”¹³⁶ “the causes for reprobating a part of mankind,”¹³⁷ “the wisdom of the Gospel,”¹³⁸ “our salvation in Christ,”¹³⁹ “the reason why God corrects sin in His own elect, and does not deem the reprobate worthy the same remedy,”¹⁴⁰ “the purpose of God,”¹⁴¹ “the reasons why God knowingly and willingly permitted man to fall,”¹⁴² “the mystery of His majesty,”¹⁴³ “the abysses of the mind and counsel of God,”¹⁴⁴ “the mind of God,”¹⁴⁵ “the eternal fountain and the free adoption of God,”¹⁴⁶ “His judgements,”¹⁴⁷ “the calling of the Gentiles,”¹⁴⁸ “the source of all the wickedness of mankind and the corruption of nature,”¹⁴⁹ “the reason of the counsels of God,”¹⁵⁰ were all considered hidden.

¹³³ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 56

¹³⁴ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 72

¹³⁵ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 72

¹³⁶ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 81

¹³⁷ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 81

¹³⁸ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 96

¹³⁹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 111

¹⁴⁰ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 117

¹⁴¹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 120

¹⁴² Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 126

¹⁴³ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 127

¹⁴⁴ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 132

¹⁴⁵ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 146

¹⁴⁶ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 160

¹⁴⁷ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 162

¹⁴⁸ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 168

¹⁴⁹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 178

¹⁵⁰ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 190

Secret were-“the counsel of God,”¹⁵¹ “the communication of His grace,”¹⁵² “His council,”¹⁵³ “His good pleasure,”¹⁵⁴ “His will and purpose,”¹⁵⁵ “His judgment,”¹⁵⁶ “His power,”¹⁵⁷ “the wisdom of the Gospel,”¹⁵⁸ “the inspiration and influence of His Holy Spirit,”¹⁵⁹ “the secret mind of God,”¹⁶⁰ “His sovereign reign,”¹⁶¹ “His illumination,”¹⁶² “His will,”¹⁶³ “His judgment,”¹⁶⁴ “His wonderful counsel by which He governs and directs all things,”¹⁶⁵ “His majesty which surpass the narrow limits of our finite intellect.”¹⁶⁶ These were all “incomprehensible” according to Calvin.

When one looks at the context of these quotations, one recognizes that most of them are related to the main focus of the work, which is an explanation of the notion of eternal predestination of God. For instance, in response to the question of how it is possible that God condemns the wicked, and yet justifies the wicked, he stated: “this is a mystery that is shut up in that secret mind of God, which is inaccessible to all human understanding.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁵¹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, pp. 27, 33 35, 46, 81, 91,93, 99, 100, 105, 112, 125, 132, 141, 177, 184, 185,186, 190, 193, 194, 197, 199, 200, 201

¹⁵² Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 56

¹⁵³ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 59

¹⁵⁴ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 65, 141

¹⁵⁵ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 77, 88, 115, 205

¹⁵⁶ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, pp. 83, 141, 162, 177, 184, 195

¹⁵⁷ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 96, 172

¹⁵⁸ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 96

¹⁵⁹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 130

¹⁶⁰ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 162

¹⁶¹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 191

¹⁶² Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 205

¹⁶³ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 69

¹⁶⁴ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 83

¹⁶⁵ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 120

¹⁶⁶ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 127

¹⁶⁷ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 162

To answer the question of “how it was that God, by His foreknowledge and decree, ordained what should take place in Adam, and yet so ordained it without His being Himself in the least a participator of the fault, or being at all the author or the approver of the transgression,” Calvin replied, “this is a secret manifestly far too deep to be penetrated by any stretch of human intellect.”¹⁶⁸ On other occasions he answered questions by echoing the words of the apostle Paul: “who art thou, o man, that replies against God?”¹⁶⁹ or by offering a warning to those “who presume to subject the tribunal of God to their own judgment,”¹⁷⁰ or by stating simply “because it was His will.”¹⁷¹ Frequently, he was not ashamed to confess “his utter ignorance;”¹⁷² at other times, he’d respond simply: “the reason lies hidden in Himself.”¹⁷³

If one sets aside the collection of a hundred and fifty-nine *Sermons on Job*, (which he drafted three years after this treatise) *The Eternal Predestination of God* turns out to be his most exhaustive defence of God’s justice. For in this work Calvin spoke as a lawyer, as he wrote in the preface:

Now this Defence, which I offer to all the godly, will, I hope, be a strong and effectual remedy to those who are healable, and will serve also as a wholesome antidote to the sound and the whole. And the subject itself is one to which the

¹⁶⁸ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 128

¹⁶⁹ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 32, 39, 40, 41, 71

¹⁷⁰ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 34

¹⁷¹ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 122

¹⁷² Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 128

¹⁷³ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 117

children of God may devote their most studious attention, that they become not ignorant of their heavenly birth and origin.¹⁷⁴

Here and elsewhere all the references to the hidden, secret and concealed character of the “modus operandi” of God had no other purpose than that “of vindicating the justice of God from all calumny,”¹⁷⁵ “from the profane slander of men,”¹⁷⁶ “and from ignominy.”¹⁷⁷ Calvin was fully convinced that “the justice of God could not be measured by the short rule of human justice.”¹⁷⁸ “God,” he said, “in a secret and marvellous way justly wills the things which men unjustly do. His will, though hidden, is the highest justice,”¹⁷⁹ or “the highest rule of all equity.”¹⁸⁰

From the above mentioned premises Calvin was able to draw the following conclusion:

The sum of the doctrine of the thus Reviled one is; that God, in wondrous ways and in ways unknown to us, directs all things to the end that He wills, that His eternal will might be the first cause of all things. But why God wills that which may seem to us inconsistent with His nature the Reviled one confesses to be incomprehensible! And, therefore, he declares aloud that the ‘why?’ of God’s works is not to be audaciously or curiously pried into; but that, on the contrary, as the counsels of God are a mighty deep, and mysteries that surpass the limits of our

¹⁷⁴ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 13. CO 5, 254: “Ista autem, quam sub vestro nomine piis omnibus offerimus, defensio, tam erit ad curandos sanabiles, ut quidem speramus, validum efficaxque remedium, quam salubre antidotum sanis et integris.”

¹⁷⁵ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 34. CO 08, 342: “conscientias valide urget, Deique iustitiam a sacrileges hominum calumniis acerrime vindicat.”

¹⁷⁶ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 177

¹⁷⁷ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 193

¹⁷⁸ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 131

¹⁷⁹ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 72

¹⁸⁰ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 190

comprehension, it becomes a man rather to adore them with reverence than to investigate them with presumption.¹⁸¹

Everything that needs to be said is found in this statement. Evil is not an independent reality from God. All is subject to the Creator. He holds the reins of all things in His hands and directs all to the fulfilment of His purposes. He uses evildoers as the instruments of His providence in order to accomplish His secret judgements. Even Satan must stand ready in His service. This does not mean that God bears the ultimate responsibility for evil and that evil deeds are thus excused. “In this respect we should not think of any violent coercion, as though God led men into evil against their will; but in a marvellous and incomprehensible way He overrules all the impulses of men so that their free-will remains intact.”¹⁸² If men act wrongly, they break the commandment of God by their own free-will and yet through their conduct, God fulfils what He, in His hidden counsels, has determined to accomplish.¹⁸³

His defence of God reached a climax when Calvin, echoing Augustine, sums up his point of view:

So mighty, therefore, are the works of God, so gloriously and exquisitely perfect in every instance of His will, that by a marvellous and ineffable plan of operation peculiar to Himself, as the ‘all-wise God,’ that cannot be done, without His will, which is even contrary to His will; because it could not be done without His

¹⁸¹ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 190

¹⁸² Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 199

¹⁸³ In his *Commentary on Romans* Calvin had highlighted the same principle: “God is just, even though his justice may be hidden from us,” and “there is no higher cause than the will of God.” See *Commentaries on Romans*, p. 25

permitting it to be done, which permission is evidently not contrary to His will, but according to His will.¹⁸⁴

It would be inaccurate to conclude that Calvin's discussion of predestination was written from an insensible and indifferent perspective. It is just the opposite: Calvin passionately maintained that God was not a 'far-away' God. God is a God who is intimately involved in human salvation. The divine hand has ordained all things to be as they are, and this order is manifest in the world and revealed in the Bible. This order is crucial for Calvin, and it takes root in his theology. God has so ordained the salvation of the elect that none come to God except by a divine calling. To say that humans seek God by their own free will is to disrupt this order for Calvin, hence limiting God's role in salvation. The result is that Calvin upholds God's sovereignty despite an inability to understand it fully. Anything we allege to be injustice on God's part is a matter of God's secret will, a will far beyond human comprehension. It is with this understanding that the exploration of predestination can begin, with special attention given here to Calvin's citation of specific biblical texts which have informed his discussion of this doctrine. In this work, for the first time, Calvin made reference to the fact that some "allege that we hereby attribute to God a twofold will."¹⁸⁵ Although Calvin had negated this charge, firmly asserting that "God is so far from being variable,"¹⁸⁶ this theme is returned to some years later in his *Sermons on Job*.

¹⁸⁴ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, pp. 44 and 126. CO 08, 270 and 364: "Propterea namque magna opera Domini exquisita in omnes voluntates eius, ut miro et ineffabili modo non fiat praeter eius voluntatem, quod etiam contra eius fit voluntatem: quia non fieret, si non sineret: nec utique nolens sinit, sed volens."

¹⁸⁵ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 99

¹⁸⁶ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 99

Nonetheless, although Calvin anticipated and concentrated on some of the essential elements that he would further develop in his *Sermons on Job*, his defence of God's justice was very nearly exhaustive. The French Reformer was exclusively concerned with vindicating the justice of God against all those who think God is unjust in electing some men to eternal perdition. The general problem of human suffering was not taken into account. The complete absence of any reference to Job in this treatise clearly shows that Calvin had little concern for this sensitive problem.

2.10 *Congrégation sur l'Election éternelle*

In the year 1552, just as he was drafting the *Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*, Calvin held a seminar on the problem of predestination.¹⁸⁷ In his exposition, Calvin picked up all the most important themes that he had developed in his previous tracts, though he seemed to have been more deeply concerned with its existential character than with the theological tenets of the doctrine of predestination.

The starting point of his reflections was always the same. "How does faith arise?" Once again Calvin stressed his opinion:

Or voicy par où il nous faut commencer: c'est assavoir, que quand nous croyons en Iesus Christ, cela ne vient pas de nostre propre industrie, ne que nous ayons l'esprit tant haut, ne tant aigu, pour comprendre ceste sagesse celeste, laquelle est contenue en l'Evangile: mais que cela vient d'une grace de Dieu, voire d'une grace laquelle surmonte nostre nature. Il reste maintenant à voir si ceste grace est commune à tous ou non. Or l'Ecriture sainte dit le contraire: c'est assavoir, que

¹⁸⁷ CO 8, 254-366

Dieu donne son saint Esprit à qui bon luy semble, qu'il les illumine en son Fils.¹⁸⁸

With this statement he made recourse to Divine Hiddenness once again, stating: "Il faut donc conclure de cela, que la foy procède d'une source et fontaine plus haute et plus cachée: c'est assavoir de l'élection gratuite de Dieu, par laquelle il choisit à salut ceux que bon Luy semble."¹⁸⁹ For Calvin it was a matter of fact:

nous sommes si rudes et si ignorans, que nous ne pouvons pas comprendre ce que Dieu a voulu nous estre caché. Mais cependant tenons pour tout resolu, que Dieu a iuste cause de faire ce qu'il fait, combien qu'elle nous soit cachée, que les choses que nous ne cognoissons, ne laissent point d'estre, pourtant. Car nous ne voyons point encores les choses faites face à face.¹⁹⁰

In the light of this perspective, Calvin repeated all the basic arguments of his previous works with a notable innovation. Among the biblical texts that he quoted, one finds a significant number of references to the vicissitudes of Job:

Et comment est-ce que Dieu fait ces choses? Y a-il iniquité en luy? Il est bien certain que non. Mais il envoye ses verges au monde, et par un iuste iugement, il nous punit comme il luy plaist; et combien que nous ne voyons point encores la raison, si faut-il que nous cognoissions que tout ce qu'il fait est iuste. Et dont voila Iob qui ne s'enquiert point pourquoy Dieu luy avoit osté tout son bien, qu'il l'en avoit despouillé du tout. Il est vray qu'il dispute fort sur cela, et dit que ce n'est point pour ses pechez. Mais tant y a neantmoins, qu'il conclud que cela ne

¹⁸⁸ CO 08, 94

¹⁸⁹ CO 08, 94

¹⁹⁰ CO 08, 106

luy est point advenu sans la providence de Dieu; que tout le mal qu'il enduroit, combien qu'il fust dur à porter, ne laisse point d'estre adoucy par la patience qu'il en avoit. Et de faict, murmure-il contre Dieu? Non, mais il dit: Le Seigneur me l'avoit donné, il me l'a osté: son Nom soit benit! et ne parle point en hypocrisie, mais en verité. Apprenons donc que quand Dieu fera les choses, encores qu'aucune raison ne nous apparaisse, neantmoins nous ne laissons point d'adorer son conseil et son iugement, et confesser qu'il est iuste et equitable; et si neantmoins nous avons les yeux esblouys, et si ceste clarté nous est incomprehensible, toutesfois Dieu nous declarera ce qui nous est maintenant incognu; voire quand il nous aura pleinement conioincts à soy, comme c'est le but auquel il nous appelle.¹⁹¹

Undoubtedly, this seminar paved the way for Calvin to turn his attention to Job, who suffered not because of persecution but for unknown reasons. B. Cottret supports this conclusion when he writes: "Incessantly subject to migraine, fever, haemorrhoids, kidney stones and phthisis, his physical appearance called up images of Job. Brother of all in his humanity, subject to all torments, Job furnished Calvin with the topic of his finest reflections."¹⁹² Perhaps no other theological work reveals such a major similarity between the preacher and the subject of his preaching than is found in *Sermons on Job*. Job's tragic experience of unjustified suffering was Calvin's experience as well. When he asked why do I suffer? Why do evil and anguish afflict the innocent? People echoed Job's friends as they answered: You deserve to suffer. Neither Job nor Calvin, however, was willing to accept this simplistic response which in their opinion deeply distorted the

¹⁹¹ CO 08, 116-117

¹⁹² Cottret, *Calvin, A Biography*, p. 234

truth. Both were convinced that they did not deserve such punishment and they dared to call upon God to vindicate them. From such a perspective these Sermon on Job should be interpreted in a supra-temporal context.

At the beginning of 1554, just when he was under the greatest attack, Calvin began an analysis of the book of Job culminating in one hundred and fifty-nine sermons with a verse-by-verse interpretation of the text. He decided to address his sermons, not to scholars and students, but to all those who were confronted daily by the anguished problem of the meaning of God's divine governance in a hostile world.¹⁹³

His exegesis of the text was deeply pastoral and was far from being an abstract theological disquisition, as H. Dekker pointed out:

Calvin's treatment of Job is intensely practical. It is a living, breathing thing. It throbs with moral and spiritual reality. Job's pulse is there. Ethical passages are prominent, involving the family, society, the church and the state, well as the individual life...No abstract disquisition on a dogmatic formula detaches the congregation from Job's exemplary life, his struggles of soul, the wrestling of his counselors, and the Majesty of God. This is the living Word! It has to do with Job and his God, Job and his fellows, Job and himself. And Job is always every believer. That makes great preaching.¹⁹⁴

As Dekker says, far from being an academic disquisition, these sermons have an strongly practical thrust.

¹⁹³ Often Calvin explained that the book of Job was written for "notre edification." CO 33, 570 and CO 35, 64

¹⁹⁴ H. Dekker, *Sermon from Job* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Ed. Nixon, Baker, 1980), xxxvii

A juridical framework and legal jargon mark his preaching. Calvin was wrestling with the text in order to understand and justify either Job in the presence of God, or God in the presence of Job. Job, who represents every believer, therefore represents Calvin. More than David, Job became the personification of the deepest contradiction of Calvin's life and in his passionate protest it is possible to hear the genuine concerns of the French Reformer. An entirely new perspective emerges, little by little, in the course of his preaching. The tragic experience of Job, with which Calvin identified, remains at the center of his preaching. On this basis, then, one can understand why the themes of exile and persecution,¹⁹⁵ as well as the political chaos and the internal predicament of the church,¹⁹⁶ ever present in the background, didn't figure significantly in his sermons. In fact, not only was Calvin confronted with sufferings stemming from comprehensible reasons, such as torture, exile and persecution, but also with those which arose from inexplicable reasons. If in his treatises and the letters written before the drafting of his *Sermons on Job*¹⁹⁷ Calvin had had the intention of making suffering bearable in a time of fierce persecution and had hoped to stimulate courage, within these sermons he faced a more complex situation: Why had God afflicted Job without cause? Why had God acted

¹⁹⁵ The references are scattered: The believers are often described as sheep among wolves. In Sermon 118 Calvin mentioned martyrdom: "Pensions-nous quand les ennemis de la verité condamnent aujourdhuy les fidelles à estre brûlez, et qu'ils sont assis pour ce faire en leurs sieges tapissez, qu'un gibet ne soit point plus honorable quand un martyr sera là tormenté, ou qu'on dressera un posteau, et que là un enfant de Dieu sera brûlé?" CO 34, 720

¹⁹⁶ In Sermon 16 Calvin mentioned Servetus: "Autant en a-il esté d'autres fantastiques, et de nostre temps mesmes que ceux qui ont troublé l'Eglise ont voulu avoir leurs visions: et c'est l'un des articles de ce malheureux qui a esté brûlé. Car il disoit que le S. Esprit n'a point regné encores, mais qu'il devoit venir: le meschant fait ce deshonneur à Dieu, comme si les Peres anciens n'avoient eu qu'un ombrage du S. Esprit, et comme si une fois ayant esté espandu visiblement sur les postres, il s'estoit retiré incontinent, tellement que l'Eglise ait esté destituée du S. Esprit. Voila ce qu'il met en avant, et quant à luy il se veut faire un Mahomet pour avoir le S. Esprit, à sa poste: mais on voit comme le diable l'avoit transporté: et il faut que Dieu ameine telles gens iusques là, afin que nous les ayons en plus grande detestation". CO 33, 204

¹⁹⁷ An eloquent example is found in the "*Quatre Sermons traitant de matieres fort utiles pour notre temps*", edited just two years before Calvin drafted his *Sermons on Job*.

in an incomprehensible way? Why was there evil? Why was there suffering? Whilst the sufferings of a persecuted church might have a possible, though non-rational explanation, in Job's case this didn't appear to be so, therefore Calvin found it hard to accept that these tragic events had happened gratuitously.

One can understand why, then, Calvin rarely, or only incidentally, alluded to the events of his day. Suffering which stemmed from unknown reasons was his central concern, rather than the anguish of a persecuted church. To put it another way, a response to the unjustified anguish of Job, rather than response to an afflicted church's cries of sorrow, governed his interpretation of the text. Even so the *Sermons on Job* were so popular, as Fritz Büsser pointed out:

La grande, la profonde raison de la faveur dont les sermons sur Job ont joui dans le monde chrétien, c'est l'intensité de la piété.... Dieu, toujours Dieu, ne voir que lui, sa puissance, sa justice, sa miséricorde; s'abaisser, s'anéantir en sa présence, ne vivre que de lui et par Lui, c'est la note dominante, exclusive des ces discours; cette piété intense est le secret de leur vertu.¹⁹⁸

Far from being a secondary source, they integrate his theology, as one of the most distinguished connoisseurs of Calvin's theology has pointed out: "Voilà le Calvin qui m'apparaît come le vrai et authentique Calvin, celui qui explique tous les autres, Calvin, le prédicateur de Genève, pétrissant par sa parole l'âme réformée au XVI siècle."¹⁹⁹ Calvin himself recognized it, when, in April 1564, just before his death, he wrote: "I protest also that I have endeavoured, according to the measure of grace he has given me,

¹⁹⁸ F. Büsser, *Calvin über sich selbst* (Zürich, Zwingli Verlag, 1950), p. 84

¹⁹⁹ E. Doumergue, *Calvin, le Prédicateur de Genève* (Genève: Labor & Fides, 1909), p. 9

to teach his word in purity, both in my sermons and writings.”²⁰⁰ In the light of this perspective his *Sermons on Job* paved the way for topics that found their definitive form in the last version of the 1559 edition of *The Institutes*.

2.11 Overview

The foregoing review has enabled us to highlight some important points. Firstly, Calvin didn't receive his theological insights all of a sudden but developed them little by little. Calvin was not the kind of person who experienced a Damascus road conversion. He always emphasized the gradualness rather than the suddenness of his conversion, and the difficulty of making progress in the Christian life.²⁰¹ Secondly, Calvin's theology cannot be understood independently of the tragic events of his time which exerted a deep influence on his thought and life. Among those worth mentioning are the suffering of the Christians in France,²⁰² the death of his child Jacques,²⁰³ followed by that of his wife.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), vol. 7, p. 366. CO 20, 299: “Je proteste aussi que i'ay tasché, selon la mesure de grace qu'il m'avoit donnee, d'enseigner purement sa Parole, tant en sermons que par escrit et d'exposer fidelement l'Ecriture sainte.”

²⁰¹ “We are converted, he wrote, little by little to God, and by stages” (Comm. Jer. 31:18) I owe this quotation to W. Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 11

²⁰² In his Sermon on Psalm 24 he wrote: “N'estimons pas que Satan ne monstre aussi bien sa rage en France comme aux autres pays. Il ne faut point attendre les postes: la chose est toute evidente. Il n'y a quartier ne province, ou il ne s'exerce cruauté plus que barbare. Il n'y a nulle audience, nulle iustice. Quiconque ouvre la bouche, il est mis au feu. Pourtant prions nostre Seigneur qu'il estende sa main forte, qu'il ne permette point que ses povres fideles soyent vaincus par la rage de leurs ennemys. Que s'il luy plait de rendre tesmoignage à son Evangile par l'effusion de leur sang, qu'il leur donne ferme constance, que mesme en mourant ilz puissent triompher de leurs ennemys, sachans qu'en Iesus Christ ilz ont salut et vie. N'est ce point là un bien inestimable d'estre victorieux en mourant? La victorye est à nostre capitaine.” CO 32, 479

²⁰³ On August 19, 1542 he wrote to Viret: “Dominus certe nobis vulnus inflixit grave et acerbum in morte filioli. Sed pater est: novit quid filiis suis expediat.” CO 11, 430

²⁰⁴ On April 2, 1549 he wrote to Farel: “De morte uxoris meae iam forte istuc rumor pervenit. Ego ne prorsus moerore conficiar, quoad possum adnitor. Adsunt etiam amici, nec quidquam reliquum faciunt, ut aliquid levationis afferant animi mei aegritudini.” CO 13, 228. On April 7, 1549 he wrote to Viret: “Tametsi valde mihi acerba fuit mors uxoris, moerorem tamen meum, quoad possum, cohibeo.” CO 13, 230

It is certainly true, as P. Helm claims, that “unlike his hero Augustine, Calvin published no retractions.”²⁰⁵ Yet, contrary to the interpretation given by R. Stauffer, according to whom “un trait de la prédication calvinienne sur Dieu, la création et la Providence est son invariance théologique, c’est à dire le fait qu’en dépit des circonstances diverses où elle a été prononcée, elle ne révèle aucune évolution doctrinale,”²⁰⁶ his theological insights underwent a constant evolution; one need only to cite the doctrine of predestination, which in the first edition of *The Institutes* was discussed within the context of the first article of the Apostle’s Creed where in the editions of 1539-1554 it was examined within a soteriological setting. Calvin was not merely an academic teacher, devoted to metaphysical investigation, but a theologian, who wanted to be a minister. His powerful personality influenced history and was influenced by history.

Thirdly, the structure of Calvin’s thought was greatly marked by his juridical background. Was Calvin a theologian who became a lawyer or a lawyer who turned theologian? To this question I will attempt to give an answer in the following chapter. After analyzing the juridical background of the French Reformer, I will investigate the “lawsuit” metaphor he used to characterize the relationship between God and man. During the course of the “court case,” Calvin provided a defence for God and Job, respectively, depending upon the circumstances. He showed empathy with Job, but at the same time sharply refused to place God in the defendant’s box, bringing Him to trial. His *Sermons on Job* became a passionate plea in favour of God’s rights against those who wanted to lay charges against Him.

²⁰⁵ P. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 6

²⁰⁶ Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 304

Chapter III

The juridical framework of Calvin's "Theodicy"

3.1 "Defence" or "Theodicy"?

In the previous chapter, I examined the development of Calvin's thought, not only in reference to his rediscovery of the concept of "*Deus Absconditus*," but also as he attempted to defend God. In this chapter we must address a preliminary question which arises: What kind of "defence" did Calvin develop and how could this "defence" be defined? In order to respond this question, I must begin with the distinction that Alvin Plantinga¹ draws between "defence" and "theodicy" which R. Douglas Geivett has summarized in the following way:

It is widely accepted, at least among theists, that there is a nontrivial distinction between a defence and a theodicy. A defence is supposed to show that no contradiction can be made out between the existence of God and the existence of evil. But this does not show that God actually has a justifying reason for permitting evil. A theodicy is often thought is supposed to show what justifying reasons God actually has for permitting evil.²

¹ "Epistemic Probability and Evil", in M.M. Olivetti, *Teodicea oggi* (Padova: Cedam, 1988), p. 561

² R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the evidence of God: The challenge of John Hick's theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 60. This distinction is shared also by O. Wiertz, "Das Problem des Übels in Richard Swinburnes Religionsphilosophie" in *Theologie und Philosophie* 71 (1996) pp. 224-256 and by Natalie Brender and Larry Krasnoff who write: "The aim of defence is to show that antitheistic arguments from evil are not successful on their own terms. The general aim of theodicy, by contrast, is to give positive plausible reasons for the existence of evil in a theistic universe." in *New Essays on the History of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

In this chapter I will try to demonstrate that Calvin developed a genuine “theodicy” in all of his works, if one utilizes the standard definition, namely: “The vindication of the justice and goodness of God in spite of the existence of Evil.”³

Although Calvin made extensive use of legal terminology, this aspect of his thought has often been neglected and it would require a major monograph to shape the problematic for a complete investigation. The following remarks, making no pretence to being exhaustive, rely upon the use of two databases. *The Calvin Opera Database*, the first and more exhaustive of the two, consists of 59 volumes of the *Corpus Reformatorum*.⁴ Here, the word “vindicare,” with all his variants,⁵ recurs in various contexts of time and situation. The first example is found in the Preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms* where Calvin stressed that the main purpose of his *Institutes* was “to vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord.”⁶ In all of these texts, the main meaning turns out to be quite the same; that is to say: “to keep,” “to preserve,” or “to defend,” rather than the traditional interpretation, “to punish” or “to retaliate.” Similarly, the word “vindex”⁷ can be understood in this way. It appeared for the first time in the *Commentary on Seneca’s de Clementia*, when Calvin wrote:

Valuit praesertim Connani mei autoritas, viri prudentissimi ac disertissimi cui uni stant et cadunt mea consilia. Adde quod optimum autorem plerisque sordescere, ac nullo paene esse numero, iniquissime ferebam: ut iamdiu

p. 63

³ *The New Lexicon of Webster Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the English language* (New York, Lexicon Publications, Inc, 1998), p. 1025

⁴ *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz (Brunswick and Berlin, 1863-1900)

⁵ In the infinitive “vindicare” occurs 65 times; “vindicat” 193 times; “vindicet” 79 times; “vindicabat” 12 times; “vindicabit” 21 times; “vindicarunt” 7 times; “vindicatus” 10 times.

⁶ *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. IV, xli. CO 31, 23: “Haec mihi edendae Institutionis causa fuit: primum ut ab iniusta contumelia vindicarem fratres meos, quorum mors pretiosa erat in conspectu Domini.”

⁷ Vindex recurs 190 times; “vindicem” 343 times; “vindicis” 12 times; “vindice” 19 times.

optaverim egregium quempiam vindicem emergere, qui illum in suam dignitatem assereret.⁸

As Olivier Millet aptly pointed out: “Conformément aux emplois latins du terme, le ‘vindex’ peut être un répondant en justice (qui prend à sa charge l’affaire et ses suites), dans un sens plus général un défenseur, ou enfin un vengeur. Le dernier sens est ici exclu.”⁹

In the second database, *The Comprehensive John Calvin*,¹⁰ the word “vindicate” (which is translated variously from the Latin words “vindicare,” and “asserire”) recurs 201 times, in 64 documents, in different contexts, most of them employed while discussing God and His primary attributes, such as justice, wisdom, will, or holiness. Contemplating the context in which these words are used, it is possible to argue for the cosmic dimension that under-girded Calvin’s perspective. In the glorious theatre which is the universe, the actors are called upon to glorify God by being believers. This duty supersedes personal salvation for every truly pious person, as Calvin pointed out to Cardinal Sadolet:

It is not very sound theology to confine a man’s thought so much to himself,

⁸CO 05, 6. The English translation in the CD *The Comprehensive John Calvin*, p. 5. “And most particularly did I set store by the opinion of my friend Connan, a man of prudence and learning, by whose judgment I stand or fall. Add to this, that I simply could not tolerate seeing the best of authors despised by most, and held in almost no esteem whatsoever; so that I had long since been wishing that some illustrious champion would stand up to vindicate his cause and restore him to his proper place of dignity.”

⁹ Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole, Etude de rhétorique reformée* (Genève: Editions Slatkine, 1992), p. 65

¹⁰*The Calvin Collection* includes all the 22 Volumes of the Commentaries on the Old Testament (Genesis, Harmony of the Law, Joshua, Psalms 1-78 & 79-150, Isaiah 1-37-38-66, Jeremiah 1-24-25-52, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) on the New Testament (Harmony of the Gospels Vol. 1-Vol 2-Vol 3, John, Acts, Romans, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I Thessalonians, II Thessalonians, I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, I Peter, II Peter, I John, and Jude) the *Institutes* (Both Battles and Beveridge), Selected Works 7 volumes (*Treatise on Relics, The Secret Providence of God, Sermons on Galatians, Sermons on Psalm 119, Sermons on the Deity of Christ, Sermons on Election and Reprobation (Genesis), Commentary on Seneca's of Clemency.*

and not to set before him, as the prime motive for his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. I am persuaded that there is no man imbued with true piety who will not consider as insipid that long and laboured exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God.¹¹

This motive of glorifying God had recurred innumerable times in the writings of the Reformer. Ernst Troeltsch wrote:

To Calvin the chief point is not the self-centered personal salvation of the creature, and the universality of the Divine Will of Love, but it is the Glory of God, which is equally exalted in the holy activity of the elect and in the futile rage of the reprobate.¹²

How, then, do we glorify God? For Calvin was absolutely clear that the human being could glorify God by vindicating and defending His justice. In Sermon 48 Calvin expressed this conviction in unmistakable accents:

Il est vray que desia quand nous voyons l'ordre de nature tel que Dieu l'a constitué, nous le devons bien glorifier. Et de fait Dieu nous a mis en ce monde, afin que nous soyons comme en un grand theatre pour contempler ses oeuvres, pour confesser qu'il se monstre et sage, et iuste, et puissant, voire

¹¹ *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 33. CO 05, 391-392: "Id tamen parum est theologicum, hominem ita sibi ipsi addicere, ut non interim principium hoc illi vitae formandae praestituas, illustrandae Domini gloriae studium. Deo enim, non nobis, nati imprimis sumus. Siquidem, quemadmodum ab eo fluxerunt omnia, et in eo consistunt, ita in eum referri debent, inquit Paulus (Rom. 11, 36). Sic quidem, 2) fateor, Dominus ipse, quo nominis sui gloriam magis commendabilem hominibus faceret, eius promovendae atque amplificandae studium temperavit, ut cum nostra salute perpetuo coniunctum foret. At quum docuerit, illud ipsum oportere omnem cuiuslibet boni et commodi nostri curam cogitationemque excedere, et naturalis aequitas id quoque dictet, non tribui Deo quod suum est, nisi rebus omnibus praeferatur, christiani certe hominis est altius conscendere, quam ad quaerendam et comparandam animae suae salutem. Itaque neminem recta pietate imbutum fore puto, a quo non insipida censeatur tam longa et accurata ad studium celesti vitae exhortatio, quae hominem penitus in se ipso detineat, nec ad sanctificandum Dei nomen, vel uno verbo, erigat."

¹²E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931), 2, 589

d'une façon admirable. Car il faut que non seulement les hommes soyent instruits avec toute reverence de luy donner gloire: mais qu'ils soyent tous ravis par dessus leurs sens et apprehension, qu'ils confessent et s'escrient avec David (Ps. 104, 24), Qu'il est impossible atteindre à ceste sagesse de Dieu, laquelle apparoist en ses oeuvres: mais encores quand Dieu changeroit tout cest ordre auquel il veut estre contemplé de nous, et auquel il nous veut aujourd'hui exercer: neantmoins si faudroit-il nous assuiettir là, que ce n'est point sans cause qu'il le fait.¹³

Especially in his *Commentaries*¹⁴ Calvin took care to enumerate all those who were committed to the task of vindicating or defending God. First, he quoted the Judges who “should vindicate the worship of God.”¹⁵ Other names followed close behind: Phinehas “was inflamed with zeal to vindicate God’s glory, so that he took upon him the zeal of God Himself.”¹⁶ Elijah, “with whom we have a common defence, fought only to vindicate the glory and restore the pure worship of God.”¹⁷ The Psalmist vindicated “God’s claim to the government of the world,”¹⁸ and “the incomprehensible wisdom of God, from that contempt which proud men have often cast upon it.”¹⁹

¹³ CO 33, 539

¹⁴ All the *Commentaries* of John Calvin are published in 22 Volumes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996).

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the four last books of Moses*, Vol. IV, pp. 97-98. CO 25, 213: “Porro in genere hoc exemplum docet non minus ad prioris quam secundae tabulae conservationem armari magistratus: ut si poenas exigent de caedibus, adulteriis, et furtis, cultum Dei vindicent.”

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the four last books of Moses*, Vol. IV, p. 239. CO 25, 300: “Quanquam peraeque conveniet sive passive sive active accipias: nempe quod Phinees zelo vindicandae gloriae Dei fuerit accensus, vel induerit ipsius Dei affectum.”

¹⁷ Calvin, “The necessity of Reforming the Church,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters* (Baker Book House, 1983), Vol 1, p. 184. CO 06, 500: “Ille se hac sola ratione excusat, quod non nisi pro vindicanda Dei gloria et restituendo eius puro cultu pugnaverit, turbarum vero et certaminum crimen reiicit in eos qui ut veritati resisterent tumultuabantur.”

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Psalms*, Vol IV, p. 154. CO 31,118: “Regis nomine mundi gubernandi partes ei asserit: aeternitas vero regni huc spectat, temporum angustis perperam ipsum includi.”

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on Psalms*, Vol. V, p. 498. CO 32,13: “Interim a contemptu vindicat incomprehensibilem Dei sapientiam, stultitiae et amentiae damnans eos omnes qui fastidiose eam

“Micah offered vindication of God from their calumny and ungodly murmurings.”²⁰

Hosea vindicated “God from every blame, that men might not raise a clamour, as though he dealt unkindly with them.”²¹ “The companions of Daniel, as a memorable example of incredible constancy, were at length prepared to vindicate the pure worship of God, not only with their blood, but in defiance of a horrible torture set before their eyes.”²² All the apostles vindicated “the judgment of God”²³ as well as Paul who vindicated “God’s justice.”²⁴

Taking these notable examples as a starting point for his further reflections, Calvin stressed that nobody ought to be exempted from the task of vindicating God. “It is our duty,” he reminded, “to vindicate the truth of God against those false suspicions which the ignorant entertain respecting it,”²⁵ to defend “God’s justice from every accusation,”²⁶ and uphold the “Lord’s glory,”²⁷ and the “purity of doctrine.”²⁸ Even “babes and sucklings are advocates sufficiently powerful to vindicate the

reiciunt.”

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on Micah*, Vol. XIV, p. 205. CO 43, 313: “Iterum hic vindicat Deum a calumnia et improbis murmuribus.”

²¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on Hosea*, Vol. XIII, p. 88. CO, 42, 233: “vindicat scilicet Deum ab omni culpa, ne homines obstrepant, quasi inclementius cum ipsis ageret.”

²² Calvin, *Commentaries on Daniel*, Vol. XII. LXV

²³ Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol. XVI, p. 453. CO 45, 282: “Unde sequitur, non irritam fore apostolorum operam, quae Dei iudicium illustrabit, ubi suae pervicaciae convicti fuerint homines.”

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the apostle to the Romans*, Vol. XIX, p. 365. CO 49, 185: “Hac priore responsione nihil aliud quam improbitatem illius blasphemiae retundit argumento ab hominis conditione sumpto. Alteram mox subiiciet, qua Dei iustitiam ab omni criminatione vendicabit.” See also CO 49, 185-186: “Nam quae ad Dei aequitatem asserendam factura erant, et ad manum illi suppetebant, initio producere noluit, quia apprehendi non poterant. Imo et secundam rationem sic temperabit ut non plenam defensionem suscipiat : sed ita Dei iustitiam demonstret, si religiosa humilitate et reverentia a nobis expendatur.”

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the first epistle of Peter*, Vol. XXII, p.110. CO 55, 263: “Cur enim nuper iubeat nos ad defensionem paratos esse, si quis fidei nostrae rationem postulet: nisi quod Dei doctrinam nostrum est vindicare a sinistris suspicionibus quibus eam gravant imperiti?”

²⁶ *ICR* I, 15.1. CO 02, 134: “Itaque sic tractanda est humani generis calamitas, ut praecidatur omnis tergiversatio, et iustitia Dei ab omni insimulatione vindicetur.”

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 1559, II, 8, 27. CO 02, 287: “Nullam itaque .meliorem regulam habeo, nisi ut iuramenta sic moderemur ne temeraria sint, ne promiscua, ne libidinosa, ne frivola; sed iustae necessitati serviant, ubi scilicet vel Domini gloria vindicanda, vel promovenda fratris aedificatio.”

²⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on Zechariah*, Vol. XV, 384. CO 44, 348: “Haec omnia dicuntur, ut discamus oblivisci quidquid mundi et carnis est, ubi vindicanda est nobis Dei gloria, et puritas doctrinae.”

providence of God.”²⁹ The French Reformer often wondered provocatively: “For what duty can be deemed more sacred than to vindicate God’s righteousness?”³⁰ For him, Christian hope resided in the conviction that in the end, God will vindicate “his poor when they are afflicted contrary to justice and equity,”³¹ and those “whose names He has deigned to write in heaven.”³²

A further example of the use of the word “vindication” occurs in the treatise *The Secret Providence of God*, where Calvin wrote:

It now only remains that I vindicate the glory of the true and eternal God from your profane maledictions and blasphemies. My defence needs only to be brief and comprehensive, because all my writings openly testify that I never had before me any other end, or purpose, or prayer, than that the whole world should dedicate itself to God with all fear, reverence and holiness; and that all men should cultivate equity with a good conscience among and towards each other; and also, that my own life might not be inconsistent with my doctrine.³³

Owing to the adversarial circumstances of his time, Calvin felt forced to become a lawyer not only for God, and the church, but also for himself in order to “vindicate

²⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Psalms*, Vol. IV, p. 96. CO 31, 89: “Parvulos et lactentes dicit satis validos esse patronos qui Dei providentiam asserant.”

³⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries, Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol. XVI, p. 18

³¹ ICR 3, 17, 14. CO 02, 602: “Atqui sancti, dum ad comprobendam suam innocentiam Dei iudicium implorant, non se ipsos omni noxa solutos et omni ex parte inculpato offerunt; sed quum in sola eius bonitate salutis fiduciam defixerint, confisi tamen esse vindicem pauperum praeter ius et aequitatem afflictorum, profecto causam in qua innocentes opprimuntur, illi commendant.”

³² Calvin, *Commentaries on Isaiah*, Vol. VIII, pp. 322-323. CO 37, 343-344: “et quamvis nos maledictis lacerent impii, sugillant, conspuant, modisque omnibus foedare conentur, meminerimus Deo minime eripi ius suum, ut nos in mundo illustret, quorum nomina dignatus est in coelis scribere.”

³³ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 339. CO 09, 312-313: “Superest ut veri et aeterni Dei gloriam a sacrilegis tuis maledictis vendicem. Tu me diabolum veri Dei loco iactas obrudere. Mihi brevis et expedita defensio est: quum scripta omnia mea clare testentur non aliud fuisse mihi propositum, quam ut pie sancteque totus mundus se Deo addicat, puraque conscientia sinceram inter se aequitatem mutuo colant omnes, vitam meam a doctrina non discrepare, non faciam Dei gratiae iniuriam, ut me tibi tuique similibus comparem, quibus innocentia non nisi in blanditiis sita est.”

our common ministry,”³⁴ to protect “his character from the imputation of being rich,”³⁵ and to defend his “doctrine and ministry from the mark of disgrace that had been set on it.”³⁶

3.2 The metaphor of lawsuit

The choice of words was not casual, as “vindicate” (which derives from the Latin word “vindicatio,” meaning “to clear of accusation, blame, suspicion, or doubt with supporting arguments or proof”) has a juridical meaning.

According to Roman Law, the “rei vindicatio” was the most important redress granted to an owner seeking to reassert his ownership. The “rei vindicatio” was a real action (“actio in rem,” as opposed to a personal action, “actio in personam”), which the owner could bring against anybody who, without any legal right, took possession of the object in question. The action not only ascertained the plaintiff’s ownership, but, more importantly, obtained restitution of the property and condemned the defendant who then had to make payment for damages.³⁷ The reason Calvin preferred the word “vindication” was, very likely, rooted in his conviction that it was his task to defend God, not only from all unjust charges, but also to restore and consequently vindicate³⁸ His Holy Name. Calvin conceived his task not only passively, in rejecting the false charges against God and demonstrating that He was not guilty, but actively,

³⁴ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 6, p. 175

³⁵ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 7, pp. 422-423

³⁶ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 6, p. 173

³⁷ Gaius (Inst.4,5) called all “actions in rem vindicationes” and Justinian accepted this terminology (Inst. 4,6,15).

³⁸ It is worth mentioning that the words “vindicate” and “vindication” occur in the works of Calvin in reference to God and His attributes much more than the words “defend” and “defence.” The English words do not always represent a literal translation of the correspondent terms in Latin and in French. For instance in CO 40, 646 and in CO 31, 89 the English word *vindicate* is the translation of the Latin verb *asserire*, whilst in CO 55, 263 is the translation of “*vindicare*.” On the contrary the French verb is quite always “*maintenir*” and in some case “*purger*.”

in vindicating His justice. This is evidenced in the *Institutes* of 1559, where Calvin constantly made use of the word “vindicare,” whenever he determined that the Person of God had been challenged. Deeply convinced that something essential was at stake, namely, the very Holy Person of God, Calvin undertook the task of vindicating “His majesty from every calumny,”³⁹ “His justice against all who would impugn it,”⁴⁰ “His glory,”⁴¹ “His sacred name from all contempt and insult,”⁴² as well as “His own right.”⁴³

It is worth noting that the use of the expression “vindicare” in reference to God was an “apax legomenon,” at least in the theological works of the Church Fathers. In fact, not one of them, with the notable exception of Rufino,⁴⁴ had made use of this word. A similar analysis of the commentaries of both Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas would demonstrate an absence of the word “vindicate” as well. Together with the word “vindicare,” Calvin employed other words, namely, “defendere,” “defensio,” “patrocinare,” in Latin; and “defendre,” “maintenir” in French. Although a careful scrutiny of the incidence of the above-mentioned words lies outside the scope of the present research, even a cursory analysis of his works indicates Calvin's preference for the use of the word “vindicare” over other

³⁹ *ICR* I, 14, 16. CO 02, 128: “Quanquam autem haec breviter sunt et minus clare dicta, ad id tamen abunde sufficiunt ut Dei maiestas ab omni calumnia vindicetur.”

⁴⁰ *ICR* I, 15, 1. CO 02, 134: “Itaque sic tractanda est humani generis calamitas, ut praecedatur omnis tergiversatio, et iustitia Dei ab omni insimulatione vindicetur.”

⁴¹ *ICR* II, 8, 27. CO 02, 287: “sed iustae necessitati serviant, ubi scilicet vel Domini gloria vendicanda, vel promovenda fratris aedificatio.”

⁴² *ICR* III, 20, 41. CO 02, 666: “ut Deus sacrum illud nomen ab omni contemptu et ignominia vendicet.”

⁴³ *ICR* I, 8, 22. CO 02, 282: “Unde colligitur hoc ius suum sibi vindicare, ac tueri nominis sui sanctitatem, non autem docere, quid homines hominibus debeant.”

⁴⁴ See: The Apology addressed to Apronianus, in Reply to Jerome's Letter to Pammachius, written at Aquileia A.D. 400, published in CD *The Master Christian Library*, Version 5, Vol. III, pp. 902, 903, 910, 937, 938 and 995

synonymous terms, whenever he made reference to God.⁴⁵

In a particularly vivid characterization Fiske stated that Calvin was "the constitutional lawyer of the Reformation, with vision as clear, with head as cool, with soul as dry, as any old solicitor in rusty black that ever dwelt in chambers in Lincoln's Inn. His sternness was that of the judge who dooms a criminal to the gallows."⁴⁶

As if he were installed in a tribunal, Calvin behaved as a lawyer trying to persuade, convince, and exhort his contemporaries that God, in spite of all the charges made against Him, was not only blameless, but also just.⁴⁷

Serene Jones in her valuable essay deepened our understanding of this rhetorical aspect of Calvin. She wrote::

When Calvin intends to make his readership feel judged, challenged, or scolded, he uses the classical form of forensic rhetoric, the rhetoric of defence and attack. His arguments become sharp-edged, his language becomes caustic, and the reader is overwhelmed by the force of his polemic.⁴⁸

Especially in his *Sermons on Job* his main purpose, perhaps sole purpose, in speaking out was to explain why bad things happened to good people, defending God with the enthusiasm of a lawyer. As Bernard Cottret reminds us, "if Calvin the theologian preserved the soul of a lawyer while speaking of God and man, this is precisely because in the sixteenth century the law had seized a position in the humanist

⁴⁵ See for instance the *Commentary on Micah*, Vol. XIV, p. 381 "The faithful, therefore, after having found God to be their deliverer, do here undertake his cause; they do not regard themselves nor their own character, but defend the righteousness of God." CO 43, p. 417: "Ergo hic fideles postquam experti sunt Deum liberatorem, ut gratitudinis testimonium reddant, usciunt eius causam: non respiciunt se ipsos, neque suas personas: sed potius hic patrocinantur iustitiae Dei."

⁴⁶ John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England; or the Puritan Theocracy in Its Relation to Civil Liberty* (Boston and New York: Mifflin & Co., 1889), p. 57

⁴⁷ In the *Institutes* words like "actio, citatio, cognitio-cognitor, damnare, inscribere, sui juris manus injicere, patrocinium, possessio, reatus, stipulatio, suffragium, tribunal tutor" occur many times, as A. Veerman in *De Stijl van Calvijn in de Institutio Christiane Religionis* (Utrecht: Kemink en zoon, 1943), pp. 117-119 has pointed out.

⁴⁸ S. Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 30

pantheon alongside grammar.”⁴⁹ Edward Dowden, who had no sympathy for Calvin’s theology, summed up the basic features of his preaching:

Clearness, precision, order, sobriety, intellectual energy are compensation for his lack of grace, imagination, sensibility and religious unction. He wrote to convince, to impress his ideas upon other minds and his austere purpose was attained.⁵⁰

Calvin’s preaching, as Francis Higman highlighted, was undoubtedly marked by a didactic quality⁵¹ The theologian, the minister, and the advocate of Christian faith were merging within Calvin's person and very often it was not easy to understand who had written: the theologian equipped with the instruments of law, or the lawyer armed with the instruments of biblical exegesis.

Considerable importance must also be ascribed to the dialectics that Calvin employed extensively: “This grand systematician is also an incomparable dialectician as” Imbart de la Tour wrote. “The theologian who forbade reason in the search for divine truths will put all the resources of his reason to disengaging and defending them. He will masterfully manipulate the usual procedure of logic: analysis and reasoning.”⁵² The concern for vindicating God’s justice dominated Calvin’s theology and represented his refuge whenever he thought that an understanding of God’s justice was at stake. Many of his Sermons are laid out in such a way as to suggest a juridical structure, consisting of an “exordium,” a “narratio,” a “confirmatio,” a “confutatio,”

⁴⁹ Cottret, *Calvin, a Biography*, p. 23

⁵⁰ E. Dowden, *History of French Literature*, p. 94, quoted by T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God* (London: Butterworth, 1947) pp. 79-80

⁵¹ F. Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in His French polemical Treatises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 123

⁵² I. de La Tour, *Les Origines de la Reforme*, IV, 181. For this quotation see Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), pp. 6-7

and, finally, a “peroratio.”⁵³

This juridical framework reached its climax in the *Sermons on Job*. In particular the first Sermon can be divided in four different parts. In the first part Calvin stated the purpose of the entire book, which was to affirm that all are in God’s hands, regardless of what happens. In the second part, Calvin confronted the problem of the apparent contradiction between God’s righteousness and Job’s innocence and gave a new interpretation of the word ‘integrity.’ In the third part he explained why God allowed Job to be subjected to so many trials. Finally there is the “peroration:

Que faut-il donc? retirons nous du mal: c'est à dire bataillons contre tels assauts à l'exemple de Iob: et quand nous verrons beaucoup de vices, et de corruptions regner au monde, encores qu'il nous faille estre meslez parmi, que neantmoins nous n'en soyons point pollus et que nous ne disions point comme de coustume, qu'il nous faut hurler entre les loups: mais plustost que nous ad visions à l'exemple de Iob de nous retirer du mal, et de nous en retirer en telle sorte que Satan ne puisse nous y faire adonner pour toutes les tentations qu'il nous mettra en avant: mais que nous souffrions que Dieu nous purge de toutes nos ordures et infections, comme il nous l'a promis au nom de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ, iusques à ce qu'il nous ait retirez des souillures et pollutions de ce monde, pour nous conioindre avec ses Anges, et nous faire participans de ceste felicité eternelle, à laquelle nous devons maintenant aspirer.⁵⁴

Although Calvin rarely succeeded in being brief and concise, he was a brilliant

⁵³ Notwithstanding, as Girardin aptly warned, this progression cannot be exaggerated: “Que la structure cicéronienne ne soit pas appliqué fermement ne doit pas etre pris pour l’indice d’une relativisation de cette rhétorique. Dans la théorie classique, cette séquence est clairement considérée comme naturelle à tout discours et ensuite souple. Il ne s’agit d’une modèle à appliquer mécaniquement, mai du mouvement même du discours persuasif. Le bon rhéteur ne sera pas celui qui convainc son auditoire; souplesse et sens de l’opportunité s’imposent comme vertus capitales.” in *Rhétorique et Théologique: Calvin, le Commentaire de l’Eptre aux Romains* (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1979), pp. 213-214

⁵⁴ CO 33, 32-33

systematic theologian, able to combine biblical insight, and a knowledge of church history within a doctrinal framework. He was, as well, a dialectical theologian.

Paul Helm wrote: “If a dialectical theologian is someone who strives to balance one theological element against another, say a high view of created human nature balanced by a radical view of fallenness, then certainly Calvin was a dialectical theologian.”⁵⁵

3.3 Calvin’s dilemma in the lawsuit between God and man

The need to absolve God from all the charges against Him and to vindicate His justice reached its highest point when, in his later years, the French Reformer wrote his 159 *Sermons on Job*. Was God just in punishing a man like Job, who, as recorded in the first verse of the first chapter, “was perfect and upright, feared God, and eschewed evil”? Yet, if Job was “perfect and upright,” how is one meant to understand his repentance and his confession of sin in the last chapters of the book?

Calvin found the answer given to Job by his friends to be conventional: You deserve punishment because you are sinner. God never does anything wrong. His providence is visible, and can be discerned in this earthly life. Unsatisfied with these answers, Calvin, like Job before him, questioned them; each calling upon God in order to be vindicated. At this point a proper lawsuit is described, wherein God and man, alternatively and respectively, take on the role of indicter and defendant. If God had accused man of being a sinner and blameworthy, then the latter charged God and blamed Him for what was happening; asking for an explanation as to why God had continually tolerated so much evil, and why evil and suffering attacked the innocent. Adopting the metaphor of a lawsuit Calvin made use of many juridical words:

⁵⁵ P. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 4-5

“Absolution,”⁵⁶ “accuse,”⁵⁷ “accuser,”⁵⁸ “advocat,”⁵⁹ “appeler,”⁶⁰ “condamner,”⁶¹ “crime,”⁶² “criminel,”⁶³ “defendre,”⁶⁴ “defence,”⁶⁵ “disputes,”⁶⁶ “droit,”⁶⁷ “innocence,”⁶⁸ “innocent,”⁶⁹ “inquisition,”⁷⁰ “intenter procez,”⁷¹ “iudicial,”⁷² “iudgement” “iuger,” “iurisdiction,”⁷³ “procedure,”⁷⁴ “proces,”⁷⁵ “procureur,”⁷⁶ “querelle,”⁷⁷ “redempteur,”⁷⁸ “sentence,”⁷⁹ “siege,”⁸⁰ “vengeance,”⁸¹ “venger.”⁸²

Calvin was extremely familiar with the legal system and its functioning, and the use of legal jargon was far from being accidental. For Calvin, the relationship between God and man could be interpreted in the context of a purely legal setting. Although Calvin used this framework faithfully, he acknowledged that it was merely an interpretative model. Even having fully adopted the phraseology of legal speech, he

⁵⁶ 3 times

⁵⁷ 59 times

⁵⁸ 51 times

⁵⁹ 26 times

⁶⁰ 16 times

⁶¹ 249 times

⁶² 17 times

⁶³ 16 times

⁶⁴ 8 times

⁶⁵ 11 times

⁶⁶ 29 times

⁶⁷ 290 times

⁶⁸ 12 times

⁶⁹ 20 times

⁷⁰ 13 times

⁷¹ 8 times

⁷² 26 times

⁷³ 9 times

⁷⁴ 20 times

⁷⁵ 11 times

⁷⁶ 4 times

⁷⁷ 46 times

⁷⁸ 46 times

⁷⁹ 284 times

⁸⁰ 88 times

⁸¹ 188 times

⁸² 31 times

was equally conscious of the fact that the imagery of the legal setting was nothing but a very imprecise metaphor to describe that which, in reality, constitutes a mystery, and he was always careful to specify its inadequacy.

The popular image of Calvin as a cold law teacher,⁸³ who knew little of the love and grace of God is based on sheer prejudices which don't hold up under scrutiny. Davis Willis argued that Calvin's legal training had not made him a legalist.⁸⁴ On the contrary the legal studies had enabled the French Reformer to learn the art of persuasion. In Sermon 132, for example, commenting the phrase of Elihu: "He breaks in pieces mighty men without inquiry, and sets others in their place," (Job 34:24) Calvin was careful to state that God would not judge men as humans might; nor would God conduct a long trial in order to punish us, nor would God be bound by any human laws.⁸⁵ God is "under no law" not because His will is tyrannical, but because His will is the "norma normans" of all the laws.⁸⁶

At the outset of his sermons Calvin was eager to explain the meaning of this lawsuit metaphor:

Mais cependant nous avons aussi à noter, qu'en toute la dispute Iob maintient

⁸³ Friedrich Brunstad, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1951). For this quotation see John Hesselink, *Calvin's concept of the Law* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1992), p.1

⁸⁴ D. Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in *The Context of Contemporary Theology, Essays in honour of Paul Lehmann*, ed. A.J. McKelkay and E. David Willis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), p. 314

⁸⁵ "Ceste inquisition donc de laquelle il parle, se rapporte proprement à Dieu en chastiant les hommes: comme s'il estoit dit, Quand les iuges feront un procez, on en parlera, et la façon et le style sera observé, tellement qu'on cognoistra les choses: et puis le dicton sera publié, on sait les crimes du malfaiteur, et comme il a esté convaincu. Mais il ne nous faut point mesurer la puissance de Dieu ne son autorité à ces loix humaines. Et pourquoi? Car il brisera sans inquisition, c'est à dire sans nous monstrier pourquoi. Il ne prononcera pas tousiours sentence, les crimes ne seront pas là recitez pour deschiffrer pourquoi c'est qu'il nous punist: cela donc nous sera caché: mais cependant il ne laissera pas toutes fois de mettre à execution sa iustice." CO 35, 176. "Retenons donc ce passage, afin que chacun se sollicite et soir et matin, quand il est dit, que Dieu ne tiendra. point une longue procedure pour nous punir, il n'est point aussi obligé a nulles loix." CO 35, 177

⁸⁶ The more exhaustive definition of God's freedom can be found in Calvin's *Commentaries on Daniel*. Vol. XIII, p. 173. He wrote: "We must not suppose the existence of any superior law to bind the Almighty; he is a law unto himself, and his will is the rule of all justice." CO 41, 152: "Non quod fingenda sit lex aliqua superior, quae Deum adstringat. Ipse enim est sibi lex, et voluntas eius est regula omnis iustitiae."

une bonne cause, et son adverso partie en maintient une mauvaise. Or il y a plus, que Iob maintenant une bonne cause la deduit mal, et les autres menans une mauvaise cause la deduisent bien. Quand nous aurons entendu cela, ce nous sera comme une clef pour nous donner ouverture à tout le livre.

Comment est-ce que Iob maintient une cause qui est bonne? c'est qu'il cognoist que Dieu n'afflige pas tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez: mais qu'il a ses iugemens secrets, desquels il ne nous rend pas conte, et cependant qu'il faut que nous attendions iusques à ce qu'il nous revele pourquoi il fait ceci, ou cela.

Il a donc tout ce propos persuadé, que Dieu n'afflige point tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez, et de cela il en a tesmoignage en soy, qu'il n'estoit pas un homme reietté de Dieu, comme on luy veut faire à croire. Voila une cause qui est bonne et vraye, cependant elle est mal deduite: car Iob se iette ici hors des gonds et use de propos excessifs, et enormes, tellement qu'il se montre un homme desesperé en beaucoup d'endroits. Et mesmes il s'eschauffe tellement, qu'il semble qu'il vueille resister à Dieu. Voila donc une bonne cause qui est mal conduite. Or au contraire ceux qui soustiennent ceste mauvaise cause, que Dieu punit tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez, ont de belles sentences, et saintes, il n'y a rien en leurs propos qu'il ne nous faille recevoir, comme si le Saint Esprit l'avoit prononcé: car c'est pure verité, ce sont les fondemens de la religion, ils traittent de la Providence de Dieu, ils traittent de sa iustice, ils traittent des peschez des hommes. Voila donc une doctrine, laquelle nous avons à recevoir sans contredict, et toutesfois le but est mauvais, que ces gens icy taschent à, mettre Iob en desesper, et

l'abysmer du tout.⁸⁷

The *Sermons on Job* were distinguished in a substantial way by the novelty of this lawsuit metaphor and with the entirely unexpected assignment of the major roles. In his previous works Calvin had conceived this lawsuit in a very traditional way, assigning the function of 'judge' to God and that of 'accused' to man.

In his *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans* Calvin had negated even the simple possibility that

God could be charged with any unrighteousness, except it can be proved, that he renders not to every one his due: but it is evident, that no one is deprived by him of his right, since he is under obligation to none; for who can boast of any thing of his own, by which he has deserved his favour.⁸⁸

The main task of God is to be our judge and He couldn't act otherwise than as a judge:

For though there are found among men unjust judges, yet this happens because they usurp authority contrary to law and right, or because they are inconsiderately raised to that eminence, or because they degenerate from themselves. But there is nothing of this kind with regard to God. Since, then, he is by nature 'judge,' it must be that he is just, for he cannot deny himself.⁸⁹

This traditional configuration underwent a radical and unexpected change.

While in other biblical books God's justice had only been discussed academically and impersonally, in *Sermons on Job*, Calvin, for the first time, encountered a real public prosecutor: Job not only defended himself by proclaiming his innocence, he also went on the offensive, wanting to demonstrate that the guilty party was not himself, but

⁸⁷ CO 33, 23

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, Vol. XIX, p. 447

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, Vol. XIX, p. 120

God. Job no longer spoke as a victim who had undergone a constant series of misfortunes provoked by God; on the contrary, he spoke as a prosecutor and began to question the traditional parameters of the relationship between God and man. In view of this changed perspective, God assumed the role of defendant and Job that of the public prosecutor. This exchange and overlapping of roles represents one of the most characteristic and interesting features of this work which emphasized and amplified the legal setting. The juxtaposition and inversion of Job's and Calvin's roles were such that it is difficult sometimes to understand who was really speaking.

Although the role of prosecutor was officially played by Job, it was Calvin who gave voice to his protest, and behind Calvin it is possible to hear the echoes of innumerable generations of people who have dared to question God's justice. Nowhere is that voice so authentic than in *Sermons on Job*. God's justice remains the centre of Calvin's concern. Dissociating himself from the interpretation given by former theologians, Calvin was the first to interpret the book of Job as a debate on God's justice, rather than on His providence. This interpretation has been challenged by Susan Schreiner who writes:

Calvin adopts the Thomistic argument that Job was vindicated because he defended the true doctrine of providence; that is, Job knew that God did not restrict his judgements to the earthly life and did not always inflict suffering because of sin. The Sermon on Job, therefore, should be read within the context of Calvin's theology of Providence.⁹⁰

In order to prove her proposition, Schreiner quotes the beginning of the first Sermon in which Calvin wrote:

⁹⁰ S. Schreiner, *Where shall wisdom be found* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 91. See also of the same author "Through a mirror dimly: Calvin's Sermon on Job," *Calvin Theological Journal* (1986), p.179

Pour bien faire nostre profit de ce qui est contenu au present livre: il nous faut en premier lieu savoir quel en est le sommaire. Or l’histoire qui est ici escrite nous monstre, comme nous sommes en la main de Dieu, et que c’est à luy d’ordonner de nostre vie, et d’en disposer selon son bon plaisir.⁹¹

This interpretative key is inaccurate. If one reads the remainder of this text, one recognizes that Calvin had another concern:

Et mesmes quand il luy plaira de lever sa main sur nous, encores que nous n’appercevions point pour quelle cause il le fait, neantmoins que nous le glorifions tousiours, confessans qu’il est iuste, et equitable, que nous ne murmurions point contre luy, que nous n’entrions point en proces, sachans bien que nous demourérans tousiours vaincus, contestans avec luy. Voila donc ce que nous avons à retenir en brief de l’histoire, c’est que Dieu a un tel empire sur ses creatures, qu’il en peut disposer à son plaisir, et quand il monstrera une rigueur que nous trouverons estrange de prime face, toutesfois que nous ayons la bouche close pour ne point murmurer: mais plustost, que nous confessions qu’il est iuste, attendans qu’il nous declare pourquoy il nous chastie.⁹²

Calvin never treated God’s providence independently of God’s justice.⁹³ For him providence was a manifestation of God’s justice. This connection between justice and providence is particularly clear in Sermon 75:

Car si nous attribuons simplement à Dieu une puissance, pour dire, Il gouverne le monde, il fait tout, il n’y a rien qui ne se conduise par son conseil et sa volonté, et que nous ne passions point plus outre, ce n’est pas glorifier Dieu

⁹¹ CO 33, 21

⁹² CO 33, 21

⁹³ There is a written evidence of this: in the *Sermons on Job* the word “providence” occurs 132 times, whereas the sentences like “iustice de Dieu,” “Dieu est iust” occur around 202 times, not to mention other passages in which one could find the same idea.

comme il appartient. Car tout ainsi que Dieu veut estre cognu tout - puissant, il veut aussi estre cognu iuste. Vrai est que par les choses qui se voyent nous n'apprehenderons pas tousiours ceste iustice (comme il a esté traité ci dessus), mais tant y a qu'il nous faut avoir ces deux choses-là, c'est assavoir, qu'en premier lieu nous cognoissions, que les choses ne se tournent point ici bas par fortune et adventure. Et pourquoy? Car Dieu dispose de tout, c'est Dieu qui gouverne et tient la bride. Voila pour un Item. Or quand nous aurons cognu ceste puissance de Dieu, à laquelle tout le monde est suiet, il faut que nous venions en second lieu à sa iustice, c'est assavoir, que nous tenions cecy tout resolu et persuadé, que Dieu ne tourne point ainsi les choses de ce monde, comme se iouant de nous ainsi que d'une pelotte. Car les meschans diront que Dieu fait un ieu des hommes, quand il prend plaisir où à les exalter, ou à les abbatre: mais quant à nous, cognoissons que Dieu n'a point une puissance tyrannique ou desordonnée, mais qu'elle est coniointe d'un lien inseparable avec sa iustice, et qu'il fait tout d'une façon equitable.⁹⁴

God's justice was a major theme throughout his *Sermons on Job*, a theme which Calvin forcefully reiterated:” Car il est question de la iustice de Dieu dont nous avons parlé, et de cognoistre que nous sommes pleins de pechez et de corruptions: que nous applicquions bien donc toute nostre estude à ceste doctrine, sachans bien que nous n'en viendrons point à bout.”⁹⁵

Repeatedly, he urged his listeners to keep in mind that “tout ce que Dieu fait est fondé en raison et en equité,”⁹⁶ “est iuste et bon,”⁹⁷ “est composé à une iustice et

⁹⁴ CO 34, 175

⁹⁵ CO 33, 202

⁹⁶ CO 34, 382

⁹⁷ CO 34, 362

sagesse infinie,”⁹⁸ “est fondé en bonne raison.”⁹⁹ Deeply convinced that God’s justice was far beyond human comprehension, Calvin incessantly criticised those who “veulent mesurer la justice de Dieu selon leur sens, et leur apprehension”¹⁰⁰ and warned them, asking: “Faut-il que nous mesurions la justice de Dieu par nostre sens”?¹⁰¹ Are we not “trop ridicule, quand nous prenons ceste hardiesse de nous eslever contre Lui, et de Lui vouloir ravir ce qui Lui appartient, le vouloir despouiller de Sa justice”?¹⁰² If, therefore, God’s justice represents the core of Calvin’s concerns, at least in the *Sermons on Job*, it is difficult to share the opinion of T. Derek, who believes “the book of Job is about God Himself, God in His majesty and incomprehensibility.”¹⁰³

Calvin was not interested in deep, abstract theological questions and never indulged in theoretical speculations but chose to be a source of courage and consolation for those who suffered. Job, who he identified with, was neither afflicted by the modern-day belief that God doesn’t exist nor by the notion that He doesn’t care about human problems. In an illuminating passage in Sermon 95, Job is described as being self-consciously aware of the fact that God rules history: “Je ne suis pas ignorant que Dieu n’ait créé tout le monde, qu’il ne gouverne tout, qu’il ne tienne tout en sa main, et que sa maiesté ne doive estre redoutable: ie cognoi toutes ces choses.”¹⁰⁴

Job never doubted that God was the ruler of history nor that anyone could

⁹⁸ CO 35, 206

⁹⁹ CO 33, 102

¹⁰⁰ CO 33, 367

¹⁰¹ CO 33, 9

¹⁰² CO 33, 467

¹⁰³ T. Derek, *Calvin’s Teaching on Job: Proclaiming the incomprehensible God* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), p. 79

¹⁰⁴ CO 34, 428

escape His design. He feared that God was unjust because He was exercising (what seemed to be) an unregulated, cruel and tyrannical power over him. In Sermon 88, commenting the text where Job cried “Would He contend with me in His great power? No! But He would take note of me,” Calvin wrote:

Comment entend-il que Dieu ne debatra point avec luy par force? Ce seroit vouloir entrer en iustice, quand il luy voudroit donner audience. Iob donc presuppose que Dieu use envers luy d'une puissance absolue qu'on appelle: pour dire, Je suis Dieu, ie feray ce que bon me semblera, encores qu'il n'y ait point de forme de iustice, mais comme une domination excessive. Or en cela Iob blaspheme Dieu: car combien que la puissance de Dieu soit infinie, si est-ce que de la faire ainsi absolue, c'est imaginer en luy une tyrannie, et cela est du tout contraire à sa maiesté, car nostre Seigneur ne veut point estre puissant qu'il ne soit iuste: et ce sont choses inséparables, que sa iustice et sa puissance.¹⁰⁵

This main interpretive key to these sermons is made clear at the very beginning of the work. After all the tragedies that had befallen him, had Job wanted to call into question God's providence, he would not have come to the simple conclusion that “God gave and God took away.”¹⁰⁶ Recognizing instead that what had happened to him was according to God's intention and not by chance, Job provided Calvin with the starting point that he needed to build his defence, that is to say “que Dieu est iuste et equitable en tout ce qu'il fait.”¹⁰⁷ Here lies the “bonne cause” of Job, that is, here is the conviction that “Dieu n'afflige pas tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs

¹⁰⁵ CO 34, 336: The same idea is echoed in Sermon 89: “Iob quand il n'aperçoit point la raison de ce que Dieu fait, imagine qu'il n'y a qu'une puissance absolue (qu'on appelle) c'est à dire, que Dieu besongne à son plaisir, sans tenir nul ordre, nulle regle, et qu'il en fait comme bon lui semble, ainsi qu'un prince quand il ne voudra point se regler par raison, mais voudra suivre son appetit.” CO 34, 345

¹⁰⁶ Job 1:21

¹⁰⁷ CO 33, 73. The phrase “Dieu est iuste” recurs 61 times.

pechez: mais qu'il a ses iugemens secrets, desquels il ne nous rend pas conte, et cependant qu'il faut que nous attendions iusques à ce qu'il nous revele pourquoi il fait ceci, ou cela."¹⁰⁸

The rapid success and popularity of *Sermons on Job* lies in the fact that he set Job's experience in a supra- historical context. In the course of this trans-historical process, which had as its centre the discovery of the meaning of human suffering through accepting the vindication of God's justice, the charges against God covered the whole gamut of human complaint. Calvin enumerated many of them. God was accused "d'iniustice,"¹⁰⁹ "de quelque tyrannie,"¹¹⁰ "de cruauté,"¹¹¹ "ou de trop grande rigueur,"¹¹² "de violence,"¹¹³ "de mensonge,"¹¹⁴ "d'estre desloyal et mesmes de n'est ce point iuste,"¹¹⁵ "comme s'il ne gouvernoit point le monde en iustice,"¹¹⁶ "comme s'il se mocquoit de nous, en nous donnant un espoir lequel nous frustrate."¹¹⁷

In his *Sermons on Job* the word "pourquoi," followed by a question mark recurs more than 200 times in a variety of contexts. In these questions resound all the anxieties and unresolved 'whys?' of human existence. The questions are neither academic nor abstract. The consistent use of the first-person plural and the fact that the questions deal with the suffering of a righteous Job, remind us that these experiences have been lived out by the Reformer, lived out by all who share human existence.

¹⁰⁸ CO 33, 23

¹⁰⁹ CO 34, 610

¹¹⁰ CO 35, 55

¹¹¹ CO 34, 12, 212.

¹¹² CO 33, 284

¹¹³ CO 34, 444

¹¹⁴ CO 33, 85

¹¹⁵ CO 33, 125

¹¹⁶ CO 34, 374

¹¹⁷ CO 35, 185

Pourquoi Dieu traite ainsi rudement les hommes?¹¹⁸ Pourquoi ne nous laisse il en paix et en prospérité plustost?¹¹⁹ Pourquoi c'est que Dieu le (Job) tormente ainsi?¹²⁰ Pourquoi donc est-ce que Dieu nous a donné la Loi, où il requiert que nous l'aimions de tout notre coeur, de tout notre sens, de toute notre vertu et puissance? Car si nous sommes adonnez à mal, et pourquoi est-ce que Dieu nous commande le bien? n'est-ce pas se moquer?¹²¹ Pourquoi choisit-il plustost l'un que l'autre. ¹²² Quelle est la raison pour laquelle Dieu persecute Job sans lui monstrar pourquoi?¹²³ Pourquoi est-ce que Dieu me punit de mes pechez, et que cependant i'en voy qu'il laisse là, qui ne sont pas meilleurs que moy?¹²⁴ Veu que Dieu ne accepte point les personnes, pourquoy pardonne-il plustost à l'un qu'à l'autre? Pourquoy supporte-il un meschant, quand on le voit estre desbordé du tout?¹²⁵ Pourquoy est-ce que Dieu nous met en ce monde? N'est-ce pas afin que nous le cognoissions Pere, et que sachans qu'il a le soin de nous, nous le puissions benir? Or au contraire on voit qu'il y a beaucoup de gens qui sont affligez, qui sont tourmentez de beaucoup de miseres à quel propos Dieu les tient-il ici?¹²⁶

Far from being the result of an intellectual exercise, these words came from the heart; this is not a detached theologian preaching in a vacuum. Perhaps in no other series of preaching has there been so much empathy between the preacher and the subject of his Sermons. Calvin recognized himself in Job's tragic experience. Despite all trials,

¹¹⁸ CO 33, 177

¹¹⁹ CO 33, 267

¹²⁰ CO 33, 613

¹²¹ CO 33, 616

¹²² CO 33, 616

¹²³ CO 33, 636

¹²⁴ CO 33, 699

¹²⁵ CO 35, 195

¹²⁶ CO 33, 163

Calvin, like Job, was able to resist the temptation to believe that God is not just. Contrary to the interpretation given by Susan Schreiner¹²⁷ Job, more than the Psalmist David, embodied Calvin's concerns and became the personification of the suffering cry: why is there evil? Why does suffering strike the innocent?

Who, if not Calvin, raised the question: "Dieu n'est-il pas iuste? Ne faut-il pas donc que tout ce qu'il fait soit réglé en raison, et en équité?"¹²⁸ It is interesting to note that every time Calvin placed his own doubts in Job's mouth, the questions were never rhetorical. They found an answer, not on the purely philosophical level, but with a Biblical sense of meaning. Everything Calvin wrote was based on the principle of "Sola Scriptura."¹²⁹ Here lies one of the most important features of Calvin's theology. He aimed to build up a theology, based not on abstract speculations, but simply on God's revelation, as Georgia Harkness observed: "Calvin did not have an ethical system in a philosophical sense. To the "frigid" theories of the philosophers he gave short shrift."¹³⁰

R. Stauffer highlighted one of the main features of Calvin's homiletic

¹²⁷ In *Where Wisdom shall be found*, Susan Schreiner contended that "when Calvin looks for an example of how one endures corrective suffering, he often turns not to Job but to David." p. 100

Recently Susan Schreiner has reiterated this conviction. She wrote: "Job was not a character that Calvin found particularly easy to like." "Calvin as an interpreter of Job" in *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 58

¹²⁸ CO 33, 472

¹²⁹ For instance the question Pourquoi (Dieu) ne nous laisse il en paix et en prospérité plustost," received the following answer: "Mais i'ai desia montré que les playes que Dieu fait, nous sont autant de médecines. Il y a donc double grace qui nous est ici montrée: l'une est d'autant que Dieu quand il nous afflige procure nostre bien, qu'il nous attire à repentance, il nous purge de nos pechez, et mesmes de ceux qui nous sont incognus. Car Dieu ne se contente pas de remedier aux maux lesquels sont desia presens, mais il regarde qu'il y a beaucoup de semence de maladies cachées en nous. Il anticipe donc, il y met ordre, c'est un bien singulier qu'il nous fait que quand il semble qu'il viene contre nous l'espée desgainée qu'il nous monstre signe de courroux: toutesfois quoi qu'il en soit il se declare medecin." CO 33, 267. To the question "pourquoi Dieu traite ainsi les hommes," is answered: "Ce n'est pas tousiours: car aussi Dieu veut esprouver nostre obeissance quand il nous tient les yeux bandez, et que nous ne cognoissons point la raison de ses oeuvres, que nous y sommes comme aveugles. Si alors nous le glorifions, et que nous confessions qu'il est iuste et equitable, encores que cela ne nous soit point manifeste: voila une bonne approbation de nostre foy, et du service que nous lui rendons." For further examples see the fourth chapter.

¹³⁰ G. Harkness, *John Calvin, The Man and his Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), p. 63

production: “son biblicisme strict, et même, serions-nous tenté d’écrire, dans son radicalisme biblique.”¹³¹ Closely connected to the form is the intense polemic vein of his pleading. Acting as if he were the defender of the Christian faith Calvin attacked all his theological opponents, no matter who they were (Muslims, Nicodemites, Libertines, Astrologers). After having specified and indicated their errors, he brought in his verdict and derided them, employing various invectives. His greatest polemic, carried on to the very end of his life, was directed against the papists, who were described: “povres bestes brutes,”¹³² “trop sots,”¹³³ “faussaires,”¹³⁴ “blasphemes,”¹³⁵ “povres,”¹³⁶ “effrontez” ,¹³⁷ “caphards et bigots,”¹³⁸ “impudents,”¹³⁹ “chiens et porceaux,”¹⁴⁰ “pures bestes,”¹⁴¹ “forgéur de imagination diabolique.”¹⁴² Their condition described as “maudite et miserable.”¹⁴³

As P. Schaff reminded us, Calvin “treated his opponents Pighius, Bolsec, Castellio, and Servetus with sovereign contempt, and called them ‘nebulones, nugatores, canes, porci, bestiae.’ Such epithets are like weeds in the garden of his chaste and elegant style. But they were freely used by the ancient fathers, with the exception of Chrysostom and Augustine, in dealing with heretics, and occur even in the Scriptures, but impersonally. His age saw nothing improper in them. Beza says

¹³¹ Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 304.

¹³² CO 33, 131

¹³³ CO 33, 217

¹³⁴ CO 33, 218

¹³⁵ CO 33, 523

¹³⁶ CO 33, 711

¹³⁷ CO 33, 715

¹³⁸ CO 33, 760

¹³⁹ CO 34, 692

¹⁴⁰ CO 35, 13

¹⁴¹ CO 35, 184

¹⁴² CO 35, 195

¹⁴³ CO 35, 102

that "no expression unworthy of a good man ever fell from the lips of Calvin. The taste of the sixteenth century differed widely from that of the nineteenth."¹⁴⁴

The charges against them were several and always detailed, as Stauffer aptly pointed out.

Calvin leur reproche ainsi de vouloir remonter à Dieu à partir de la révélation générale; de spéculer sur l'essence de Dieu dans leurs écoles de théologie; de prêter à Dieu une puissance absolue ; de considérer la Bible comme un document qui non seulement serait inaccessible aux simples fideles, mais qui dépourvu de toute "perspicuitas," serait susceptible de multiples interprétations, de méconnaître le fait que Dieu parle dans le' Ecriture; d'être des illumines et des novateurs en faisant crédit à la tradition; de considérer les anges comme des médiateurs possibles entre Dieu et les hommes; de priver enfin les fideles de la certitude du salut.¹⁴⁵

To those who criticised him harshly for being too severe, he replied:

Et comment? Est-il possible que nous voyons qu'une créature mortelle et caduque s'esleve ainsi contre la maiesté de Dieu, pour fouler au pie toute bonne doctrine: et cependant que nous portions cela patiemment? Nous monstrerions bien par cela que nous n'avons nul zele de Dieu: car il est dit au Pseaume (69, 10), Que le zele de la maison de Dieu nous doit manger. Car si nous avons un ver qui nous rongeast le coeur, nous ne devrions point estre tant esmeus, que quand il y a quelque opprobre qui est fait à Dieu, que nous voyons que sa verité est convertie en mensonge.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p.134

¹⁴⁵ Stauffer, *Dieu, la Creation et la Providence*, p. 306

¹⁴⁶ CO 35, 12. This statement echoed the most famous sentence in which the French Reformer wrote to the King of Navarra: "Even a dog barks when his master is attacked; how could I be silent when the

Although Calvin attacked his adversaries in a way that might hurt our modern and delicate ears, he certainly never indulged in the roughness or even obscenity that was common to many preachers of his time. His sometimes harsh judgements were offered with no personal resentment, but simply employed with the conviction that he must perform a particular duty. Deeply convinced that he had been called to build up the Christian church, Calvin, as *Verbi Divini Minister*, believed himself entitled to use plain words to point out others errors. One should also remember that the times in which he lived were polemical. The Protestants were engaged in a life and death struggle with Rome and the provocations to one's patience were numerous and grievous.

Was Calvin anxious and oriented to pessimism? This question has been raised innumerable times and recently by Bouwsma when he wrote: "A vocabulary of anxiety pervades his discourse; it includes not only *anxietas* and its equivalent *solicitudo* in Latin, but in French, *angoisse*, *destresse*, *frayeur*, *solicitude*, and even *perplexité*."¹⁴⁷ In this statement lies a deep misunderstanding of Calvin's attitude. Although his personality often tended to anxiety it is difficult to single out in his sermons any emphasis in this direction but only and always this comforting announcement which he summed up in Sermon 24:

Que si Dieu nous touche, soit qu'il nous frappe d'un doigt, ou qu'il nous frappe de la main, soit qu'il nous frappe à grands coups de marteau, soit qu'il nous face languir, soit qu'il nous consume tantost: si est-ce que rien n'adviendra sans sa volonté, et sa volonté tend à nostre salut, puis que nous

honor of my Lord is assailed?" CO 06, 503: "Canis, si quam suo domino violentiam inferri viderit, protinus latrabit: nos tot sacrilegiis violari sacrum Dei nomen taciti aspiceremus?"

¹⁴⁷ Bouwsma, *John Calvin: a Sixteenth Century Portrait*, p. 37

sommes de ses enfans, il n'y a point de doute.”¹⁴⁸

At the basis of this attitude there was a very deep confidence in the promises of God. Whatever tragedy might occur, Calvin never lost confidence that God would save His church from the attacks of Satan and of the wicked. Paraphrasing Bouwsma, Calvin was optimistic in spite of his natural pessimism because he was convinced that God works for human salvation.

Nous vismes hier, quand Dieu nous afflige, que par ce moyen il procure nostre salut, combien qu'il ne le semble pas. Mais quand Dieu visite ses esleus, il les matte et mortifie en telle sorte qu'ils tremblent devant sa maiesté, et sont confus, et sont là comme à demi trespassez, tellement qu'il n'y a plus d'espoir de vie quant à eux et quant au monde: il ne leur reste sinon que Dieu les regarde en pitié....Or l'issue nous est ici demonstree, c'est que Dieu nous tend la main en nous certifiant qu'il nous veut estre propice, quoi qu'il en soit, encores qu'il nous ait durement traittez.¹⁴⁹

Although his health was always precarious and during his life he encountered political and theological opposition, he maintained that God tenderly cared not only for His elect, but also for him.

3.4 Calvin's empathy with Job

It is within this polemical context that his *Sermons on Job* find their explanation. In writing them Calvin found himself faced with the following dilemma: Was it theologically correct to defend Job and ignore the fact that Job had frequently spoken excessively and randomly? And even assuming that Job's reasons were valid, how was it possible to place God in the defendant's box? How could one maintain the

¹⁴⁸ CO 33, 301

¹⁴⁹ CO 35, 91

notion of God's justice in view of the fact that Job, at the end of the book, was freed from all blame? Indeed, in light of Job's suffering how it was possible to believe in God's justice?

Calvin struggled with these anguishing questions. It appears clear that his analysis was based on two different and contradictory concerns: the desire to vindicate God's justice, while experiencing a profound solidarity with, and compassion for, the reality of human suffering. Convinced that the main goal of human life was the glorification of God, he severely criticised his listeners for their self-love, carnal desires, luxury, materialism, injustice and hypocrisy. The very way of salvation, leading one out of self-centredness is self-knowledge, humiliation, repentance and, ultimately, the glorification of God.

For Calvin, the honour of God was the salvation of mankind. Calvin was convinced that the answer to this dilemma depended upon the way in which one interpreted the integrity of Job.

In the first sermon, Calvin established what constituted the guidelines for his thought. Taking these words from Job 1:1, "Job was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil," Calvin drew a distinction between two seemingly similar concepts: integrity and perfection. The problem which has always worried Christian theologians is related to the more general question of how it is possible to be saved. If the Hebrew term "tam" is interpreted as "perfection" then the principle of salvation "per sola gratia" is doomed to fail, because Job could have been saved independently from God's grace. Calvin identified the underlying danger and wrote:

Il est dit, Qu'il estoit un homme entier. Or ce mot en l'Ecriture se prend pour une rondeur, quand ii n'y a point de fiction, ne d'hypocrisie en l'homme, mais qu'il se monstre tel par dehors comme il est au dedans, et mesmes qu'il n'a

point d'arriere boutique pour se destourner de Dieu, mais qu'il desploye son coeur, et toutes ses pensees et affections, qu'il ne demande sinon de se consacrer à Dieu, et s'y dedier du tout. Ce mot ici a esté rendu Parfaict, tant par les Grecz que par les Latins: mais pource qu'on a mal exposé puis apres le mot de Perfection, il vaut beaucoup mieux que nous ayons le mot d'integrité. Car beaucoup d'ignorans, qui ne savent pas comment se prend ceste perfection, ont pensé, Voila un homme qui est appelé parfait, il s'ensuit donc qu'il y peut avoir perfection en nous, cependant que nous cheminons en ceste vie presente. Or ils ont obscurci la grace de Dieu, de laquelle nous avons tousiours besoin: car ceux qui auront chemine le plus droitement, encores faut-il qu'ils ayent leur refuge à la misericorde de Dieu: et si leurs pechez ne leur sont pardonnez, et que Dieu ne les supporte, les voila tous peris. Ainsi donc combien que ceux qui ont usé du mot de Perfection, Payent bien entendu, toutesfois d'autant qu'il y en a eu-qui l'ont destourné à un sens contraire (comme i'ay dit) retenons le mot d'integrité. Voici donc Iob, qui est nommé entire.¹⁵⁰

In Sermon 11 Calvin presented his opinion more precisely, clarifying that Job hadn't acquired such perfection by himself; rather it had been necessary for God to reform him by His Holy Spirit so that he was, as it were, separated from the common rank of men.¹⁵¹ The distinction between 'integrity' and 'perfection' allowed Calvin to get out of

¹⁵⁰ CO 33, 27-28

¹⁵¹ "Vray est que de nature il n'estoit pas tel: et aussi quand il dit, qu'il a fait paction, c'est apres avoir profité en la crainte de Dieu, en telle sorte qu'il avoit mis sous le pie ses cupiditez mauvaises, et gagné ceste victoire sur son coeur, qu'il s'est peu tenir bridé et enserré, pour dire, Je ne convoiteray nul mal pour l'appeter et souhaiter, ie n'auray nulle veine en moy qui tende à offenser Dieu, mais ie seray ici retenu et en mes yeux, et en ma bouche, et en mes oreilles. Voila donc comme Iob avoit fait ceste paction. Cen'est pas qu'il eust une telle integrité en sa nature, il estoit homme suiet à passions comme nous, etne faut douter qu'il n'ait eu beaucoup, de tentations en sa vie: mais il a chemine en telle sorte qu'il estoit accoustumé en la crainte de Dieu iusques là, de ne concevoir point de mauvais appetis. Il avoit donc une habitude, comme on l'appelle, c'est à dire, il estoit tellement duit à cela qu'il n'estoit plus vagabond pour se jeter d'un costé et d'autre, et se solliciter à telle chose ou à telle. En somme nous voyons ici que Iob a voulu declarer que non seulement il taschoit de servir à Dieu, mais qu'il s'y estoit tellement efforcé qu'il avoit donté et captive toutes les passions de sa chair, en sorte qu'il ne luy coustoit

an impasse and, at the same time, defend both God and Job. Bound by these two contrasting concerns, Calvin's position did not seem consistent. His indecision prompted many observers to believe that he had difficulty sympathizing with Job.¹⁵² These remarks fail to grasp the complexity of the Reformer's position. It is certainly true that Calvin was "often ambivalent about Job's defence of innocence,"¹⁵³ as Thomas Derek has recognized. It is also true that Calvin repeatedly expressed a profound criticism of Job. In many ways he couldn't help but recognize that Job was "fragile,"¹⁵⁴ "excessif,"¹⁵⁵ "d'autant qu'il ne regarde point à la iustice souveraine de Dieu,"¹⁵⁶ "lourd et aveugle,"¹⁵⁷ "parle excessivement,"¹⁵⁸ "d'une affection brutale et confuse, qu'il ne tient ni regle, ni modestie,"¹⁵⁹ "blaspheme Dieu,"¹⁶⁰ behaved as "an homme desborde,"¹⁶¹ "ravy en extase,"¹⁶² and didn't have "une perfection si entiere

plus rien de servir à Dieu: pource qu'il n'avoit point ces combats que nous avons en nous à cause de nostre fragilité, et mesmes de la corruption qui est en nostre nature. Or notons que ceci n'estoit pas de sa vertu propre, il n'a peu acquerir une telle perfection de soy: mais il falloit que Dieu l'eust tellement reformé par son saint Esprit, qu'il fust comme separé du reng commun des hommes:.... il s'ensuit donc que Iob n'a peu faire une telle paction par son franc-arbitre, pour dire que la raison dominast tellement en luy, qu'il fust victorieux sur toutes ses passions: mais icy il entend attribuer à Dieu la louange d'un tel bien. Ce n'est pas donc se vanter et magnifier, comme s'il avoit acquis un tel bien: mais il recognoist que Dieu l'avoit si bien gouverné, qu'il n'estoit plus sollicité à mal en sa veue." CO 34, 625

¹⁵² An example of such interpretation is undoubtedly William Bouwsma, who writes: "Calvin's moralism prevented him from sympathizing with the tribulation of biblical figures. His almost deliberate insensitivity is nowhere more in evidence than in his reading of the book of Job. It interested him deeply; he devoted one of his longest Sermon sequences to it; and, baffled by its contrast between the faith and humanity of Job and the moralism of Job's friends, he hardly knew what to make of it. He finally came to the remarkable conclusion that Job's friends, although their "arguments and reasons" were good and their teachings "holy and useful", had mysteriously defended the wrong cause.... Calvin's moralism thus all but prevented him from understanding this poetic and paradoxical work. He was blind to its ironies." *John Calvin, a Sixteenth Century Portrait*, pp. 94-95

¹⁵³ Derek, *Calvin's Teaching on Job, Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God*, p. 54

¹⁵⁴ CO 33, 141

¹⁵⁵ CO 34, 35; CO 34, 215

¹⁵⁶ CO 34, 29

¹⁵⁷ CO 33, 162

¹⁵⁸ CO 33, 458, 464-468, 478, 635; CO 34, 351

¹⁵⁹ CO 33, 171

¹⁶⁰ CO 34, 336

¹⁶¹ CO 33, 458

¹⁶² CO 33, 157

comme auparavant.”¹⁶³

Instead of being an example to follow, Job sometimes became a mirror of human weakness. God had willed that men who were suffering would recognize themselves in his person. Commenting the verses 1-7 of chapter seven, he pointed out: “Il nous faut bien noter ce passage ici: car en la personne de Iob le Saint Esprit nous a mis en un miroir devant les yeux quelle est nostre fragilité: ie di fragilité de sens, et non point du corps.”¹⁶⁴

Calvin expressed his harshest criticism when Job complained about his suffering and gave expression to his sorrow and anger. When Job cursed the day of his birth, Calvin deeply censured him:

Voila le premier article que nous avons à observer, c'est assavoir, quel est l'estat de Iob, qu'il ne se monstre point si ferme comme auparavant:mais il y a un combat tel, qu'il monstre bien qu'il est homme fragile, et qu'il ne peut pas venir à bout comme il voudroit bien des tentations, qu'il ne s'assubiettit pas à Dieu d'un courage si paisible, comme il seroit requis, et comme il avoit accoustumé de faire.¹⁶⁵

The same happened when Job asked to die, though in this case Calvin charged him with having “prophane le nom de Dieu.”¹⁶⁶ Yet these criticisms were not enough to alter Calvin’s deep solidarity with Job’s sufferings. Even though on the surface, it might seem as though Calvin had profoundly criticized Job, it is important to note that there are many more positive affirmations. He repeatedly stressed Job was “homme

¹⁶³ CO 33, 142

¹⁶⁴ CO 33, 334

¹⁶⁵ CO 33, 141 and CO 33, 85

¹⁶⁶ CO 33, 296

d'une telle vertu et si excellente,"¹⁶⁷ "comme un Ange de Dieu,"¹⁶⁸ and warned that "nous sommes bien loin de la perfection qui estoit en Iob."¹⁶⁹ He repeatedly referred to "ce saint personnage"¹⁷⁰ as a role model, "pour resister à toutes nos affections et de les mettre bas, si nous voulons servir à Dieu,"¹⁷¹ "pour nous retirer du mal,"¹⁷² "pour repousser toutes les meschantes calomnies dont les ennemis de Dieu et de sa parole taschent de renverser et divertir notre foy,"¹⁷³ "pour benir le nom de Dieu."¹⁷⁴

In Sermon 27 Calvin reminded his listeners:

En la personne de Iob le saint Esprit nous a mis en un miroir devant les yeux quelle est notre fragilité: ie di fragilité de sens, et non point du corps. Il est certain comme nous avons dit cy dessus: que Iob a eu une vertu et constance admirable entre les hommes: toutefois si voit-on comme il en est.¹⁷⁵

In Sermon 51 he exhorted people to regard the example of Job, cognoissons puis qu'il a enduré ces combats spirituels, c'est à dire, que Dieu l'a pressé en sorte, qu'il le sentoit comme son ennemi: que quand aujourdhuy Dieu se monstrera notre Iuge, nous ne pouvons point fuir sa main, n'eschapper sa rigueur.¹⁷⁶

Over and over again he defended Job against the opinion of his friends, who deemed that his punishment was due to specific sins; stating that Job was afflicted without

¹⁶⁷ CO 33, 355

¹⁶⁸ CO 34, 625

¹⁶⁹ CO 33, 698

¹⁷⁰ CO 33, 94, 302, 369, 642, CO 34, 7

¹⁷¹ CO 33, 119

¹⁷² CO 33, 33

¹⁷³ CO 33, 323

¹⁷⁴ CO 33, 102

¹⁷⁵ CO 33, 334.

¹⁷⁶ CO 33, 637

cause for a unknown reason¹⁷⁷ “comme un meschant.”¹⁷⁸ On many occasions Calvin warned that the 'doctrine' which states those who are persecuted by 'the hand of God' cannot complain, because they are the cause of their own miseries, contains a general principle which “est tresmal appliqué à la personne de Iob,”¹⁷⁹ and consequently “Eliphas fait grand tort et iniure à Iob.”¹⁸⁰ As a matter of fact Job showed “une vertu admirable.”¹⁸¹ Even when Job was excessive, Calvin repeatedly reminded others that Job had no intention “de contester contre Dieu, comme si 'il intentoit procez,”¹⁸² “d'accuser Dieu d'iniustice,”¹⁸³ “de despiter Dieu à son v e lui maugreer,”¹⁸⁴ “de blasphemer,”¹⁸⁵ “de s'eslever contre luy.”¹⁸⁶

Although Calvin sometimes criticised Job, one has to consider his statements in the widest context of his thought. In Sermon 46 the statement that “il semble bien que Iob parle ici comme un homme qui n'a plus nul goust de la vie celeste, qu'il ne sait que c'est de la misericorde de Dieu,” is counterbalanced immediately afterwards by the acknowledgement that he “a bien monstré qu'il avoit des apprehensions terribles, ausquelles neantmoins il a tousiours resisté.”¹⁸⁷ “Si cela est advenu à Iob qui estoit constant par dessus les autres, hélas que sera-ce de nous?”¹⁸⁸ “Ne serons-nous point redarguez cent fois plus que n'a esté Iob?” he asked anxiously.¹⁸⁹

¹⁷⁷ CO 33, 103-116, 242, 372

¹⁷⁸ CO 33, 501

¹⁷⁹ CO 33, 544 and 275

¹⁸⁰ CO 34, 278.

¹⁸¹ CO 33, 90

¹⁸² CO 33, 163

¹⁸³ CO 34, 610; CO 35, 56, 132

¹⁸⁴ CO 33, 150

¹⁸⁵ CO 33, 158; CO 34, 37, and 336

¹⁸⁶ CO 33, 369

¹⁸⁷ CO 34, 61

¹⁸⁸ CO 34, 105

¹⁸⁹ CO 35, 215

While condemning the fact that sometimes Job spoke “d'une affection brutale et confuse, qu'il ne tient ni regle, ni modestie,” Calvin expressed the conviction that his 'fall' was not mortal. “Ainsi donc nous voyons comme il est tombé, et non pas d'une cheute mortelle, mais il est tombé à, demi, et Dieu l'a relevé puis apres, comme nous verrons.”¹⁹⁰ Even when there was an attitude of ingratitude in Job, Calvin excused him:

Mais notons cependant, qu'il n'a point parlé comme celui qui consentoit à tels propos: il a esté agité en sorte que ceci luy est eschappé de la bouche: neantmoins si a-il retenu en son coeur que Dieu luy avoit fait tant de biens, qu'il avoit bien raison de les recognoistre.¹⁹¹

In Sermon 28, the denial of faith in the resurrection, implicit in the words pronounced by Job, could lead to the conclusion that he spoke “comme un incrédule qui n'a rien cognu ni gousté de la vraie religion,” until Calvin recalled that this belief hadn't existed at that time:

Mais il nous faut noter qu'ici il parle de la mort des hommes telle qu'elle est en soy, comme aussi l'Ecriture sainte use bien souvent d'un tel stile. Or nous ne devons point trouver estrange que Iob ait parlé selon que nous sommes enseignés par le saint Esprit. Les choses que nous avons aujourdhuy n'estoient pas encores écrites pour ce temps-la: mais si est-ce que Dieu avoit engravé au coeur des siens tout ce qui est écrit: et Dieu encores aujourdhuy nous le fait sentir en nos ames, et l'engrave là de son doigt, c'est à dire de son saint Esprit.¹⁹²

In Sermon 36 the statement that God “laughs at the plight of the innocent,” was

¹⁹⁰ CO 33, 171

¹⁹¹ CO 33, 154

¹⁹² CO 33, 348

mitigated by saying that Job spoke “selon l’appréhension humaine.”¹⁹³ This also happened in Sermon 35 where Calvin comments on Job's phrase: “for He crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause(Job 9:17)Even admitting that “semble que Iob blaspheme ici contre Dieu, disant qu'il a esté affligé, et navre sans propos,”¹⁹⁴ he justified this statement by pointing out that Iob spoke first “selon son sentiment naturel” and that anyway his words “sans propos se rapporte à la cognoissance evidente des hommes.”¹⁹⁵ It is noteworthy that the word “semble” recurs every time Calvin tried to mitigate some of Job's more embarrassing statements.¹⁹⁶ It is also significant that Calvin pursued this defence of Job even against the charges of Elihu.

Contrary to the interpretation given by S. Schreiner, that “Elihu emerges as the greatest of Calvin’s hero,”¹⁹⁷ the French Reformer directed some very critical remarks against Elihu.¹⁹⁸ Surely the most detached and impartial judgment can be read at the beginning of Sermon 147, when Calvin, having to sum up his opinion on the extraordinary experiences of Job, wrote:

Et si un tel homme saint, et qui avoit appliqué toute son estude à, honorer Dieu, a eu besoin d'estre ainsi dompté: que sera-ce de nous? Faisons comparaison de nous avec Iob: voila un miroir d'une sainteté angelique, nous avons veu les protestations qu'il a fait ici dessus: et combien qu'il fust affligé iusques au bout, et qu'il murmurast, et qu'il lui eschappast des propos

¹⁹³ CO 33, 446

¹⁹⁴ CO 33, 437

¹⁹⁵ CO 33, 437

¹⁹⁶ See CO 33, 94, 175, 660; CO 34, 679

¹⁹⁷ Susan Schreiner, “Through a Mirror dimly: Calvin’s Sermons on Job,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986), p. 185

¹⁹⁸ For example in Sermon 136, when Elihu said to Job: “Look to the heavens and see; And behold the clouds. They are higher than you,” Calvin terms this answer “bien maigre and sarcastically wrote: car n'avoit-il point d'autre raison pour monstrier la iustice de Dieu?” CO 35, 226

extravagans: si est-ce qu'il a tousiours retenu ce principe d'adorer Dieu, et de s'humilier sous sa maiesté: ii y a eu cela en general, combien qu'il ait decliné en partie.¹⁹⁹

In this affirmation lies the heart of Calvin's dilemma: even though he was convinced of the legitimacy of several of Job's lamentations he was also a merciless critic of them.

3.5 Lawsuit against God?

Yet, if Calvin could vindicate Job and overlook "in claris" some of his exaggerated statements, surely he could not afford to place God in the defendant's box, bringing Him to trial. Caught at the crossroad, determining whether he was to be the prosecutor, or the lawyer, of God, Calvin never hesitated in the slightest: he became God's lawyer; and his first goal was "to maintenir sa gloire et sa verité,²⁰⁰ sa cause,²⁰¹ sa verite,²⁰² son honneur."²⁰³ In the widest context of this 'trial' metaphor, Calvin's defence became a constant lecture against those who wanted to charge God; a passionate plea in favour of God's rights.

In the first sermon one finds a general statement of purpose for his work which encapsulated the theme which ran through all the sermons:

Pour bien faire nostre profit de ce qui est contenu au present livre: il nous faut en premier lieu savoir quel en est le sommaire. Or l'histoire qui est ici escrite nous monstre, comme nous sommes en la main de Dieu, et que c'est à luy d'ordonner de nostre vie, et d'en disposer selon son bon plaisir, et que nostre

¹⁹⁹ CO 35, 353-354

²⁰⁰ CO 34, 144; CO 34, 216

²⁰¹ CO 34, 333

²⁰² CO 34, 458

²⁰³ CO 34, 706

office est, de nous rendre subiets à luy en toute humilité, et obeissance, que c'est bien raison que nous soyons du tout siens et à vivre, et à mourir: et mesmes quand il luy plaira de lever sa main sur nous, encores que nous n'appercevions point pour quelle cause il le fait neantmoins que nous le glorifions tousiours, confessans qu'il est iuste, et equitable, que nous ne murmurions point contre luy, que nous n'entrions point en proces, sachans bien que nous demourerons tousiours vaincus, contestans avec luy.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, when Calvin decided to become God's attorney, he needed to raise, as a good advocate, a series of questions which needed to be reviewed in preliminary discussions before coming to the heart of the matter. The first question could be put as follows: Do human beings have the formal legitimacy to charge God?

The answer to this preliminary and procedural question was negative. Even a superficial analysis of his own conditions should have discouraged men

de s'eslever contre Dieu, et de se rebecquer contre sa verité. Car qui sommes nous? Nous sommes terre et fange. Et Dieu quelle autorité a-il? Ainsi donc, si les hommes regardoyent bien à leur condition, il est certain qu'ils ne presumeroyent point de s'eslever ainsi contre Dieu.²⁰⁵

"Povre creature, où estois-tu?," asked Calvin, "Tu viens ici entrer en dispute contre ton Dieu, et l'assuiettir, et y a-il raison en cela? Que tu le viennes ainsi contreroller, et qu'il passe comme sous ta main ? et quelle audace est-cela?"²⁰⁶

The call to the laws of nature should not represent a limit to "outrecuidance,"²⁰⁷ to

²⁰⁴ CO 33, 21

²⁰⁵ CO 33, 590

²⁰⁶ CO 35, 301

²⁰⁷ CO 33, 147

“arrogance diabolique”²⁰⁸ to bring an action against God?²⁰⁹

Si on nous parle de plaider contre Dieu, nature mesme nous enseigne que nous devons avoir cela en horreur: ie di les plus meschans. Nous verrons dos gaudisseurs qui n'ont nulle conscience ne religion: si est-ce toutesfois qu'il y demeure quelque sentiment de nature engravé en eux, qu'ils sont estonnez et ont honte quand on leur dit, Veux-tu plaider contre Dieu?²¹⁰

Other times he went so far as to speak of sacrilege.

Voulons-nous donc iuger de Dieu? C'est un sacrilege: car nous usurpons ce qui est sien. Il est escrit, que tout genouil se ployera devant luy. Et pourquoy? Pour venir devant son siege iudicial, comme S. Paul l'expose au quatorzieme des Rom. Puis qu'ainsi est donc que Dieu se reserve cela à luy seul, de nous iuger: que nous reste-il, sinon de nous abstenir de ceste audace diabolique, de vouloir ainsi le contreroler, et nous rebecquer contre luy: comme s'il y avoit à redire en ce qu'il fait, et qu'il fust reprehensible, et que nous eussions quelque meilleure raison et prudence?²¹¹

His second question was related to the existence of what we would now call our ‘human rights’ in relation to God. Calvin's conclusion was plain and clear: God doesn't owe us anything: “Peut-il encores plaider contre Dieu? Nenni: il faut qu'il demouré là court. Et pourquoi? Car Dieu ne nous doit rien.”²¹² Calvin justified his opinion when he wrote that the final outcome will demonstrate que Dieu ne nous a point traittez iniquement, qu'il n'a point mis trop de charge sur nous: c'est à dire, qu'il

²⁰⁸ CO 33, 106, 305, 591, 710, 749; CO 34, 274, 300

²⁰⁹ CO 33, 106

²¹⁰ CO 33, 411

²¹¹ CO 35, 298

²¹² CO 33, 500

ne nous a point affligez outre mesure.”²¹³

In this same sermon Calvin emphasized that God will not enter into debate: “Dieu ne s'abaissera point iusques là, de nous répondre quand nous l'appellerons en iustice: il ne sera point là comme nostre partie.”²¹⁴ Nevertheless, even accepting that one might bring an action against God, the possibility of winning the case would be nonexistent.

Quand donc il sera question de disputer de ceci ou de cela : mesmes quand nous serons venus aux combats, que nous demeurions là. humiliez comme povres brebis : que nous venions tousiours à ceste conclusion, Or Dieu est mon Iuge, et il n'y a que redire en lui: encores que i'auroye licence de plaider, si est-ce que ma cause est perdue, car ie ne lui pourrai point amener un mot qu'il n'en ait mille à l'encontre. Voila donc comme nous avons à glorifier Dieu sans contester contre lui, encores qu'il nous fust licite d'entrer ben procez.²¹⁵

Identifying himself with those who tried to charge God, he had to recognize that this action was doomed to fail: “nous ne profiterons rien à nous eslever contre Dieu, si nous pretendons de l'amener en iustice.”²¹⁶

Convinced it was not only useless,²¹⁷ “ceste audace diabolique qui incite les hommes à plaider contre Dieu,”²¹⁸ but also counterproductive, Calvin, the skilled

²¹³ CO 35, 174

²¹⁴ CO 35, 174

²¹⁵ CO 34, 36. See also CO 35, 9: “Il est vray que nous n'appercevrons point la raison de ce qu'il fait, mais d'où procede cela, que de nostre infirmité et rudesse? Faut-il que nous mesurions la iustice de Dieu par nostre sens? Où seroit-ce aller? Quel propos y auroit-il? Ainsi donc que nous apprenions de glorifier Dieu en tout ce qu'il fait: et combien que sa main nous soit rude, que nous ne laissions pas tousiours de confesser, Helas! Seigneur si i'entre en procez avec toy, ie say bien que ma cause est perdue.”

²¹⁶ CO 33, 467

²¹⁷ CO 33, 470: “Ainsi en est-il, que si nous voulons plaider contre Dieu, c'est autant comme si nous iettions un fardeau sur nostre teste, et il faut qu'il retombe là dessus en despit que nous en ayons: nous aurons beau fuyr ou ça ou là, si est-ce qu'il retombera sur nous.” See also CO 35, 190

²¹⁸ CO 34, 174

attorney, took care to enumerate the risks in bringing a lawsuit against God: “Dieu aura sa main armee, et la levera du ciel pour rendre confus tous ceux qui auront ainsi plaidé contre lui.”²¹⁹ “Gardons-nous d'intenter querelle contre Dieu quand il nous frappe de ses verges, et de l'avoir pour ennemi mortel,”²²⁰ he warned in Sermon 118.

To the question: “Presumerons-nous de nous eslever contre Lui?” his answer was clear:

Or nous ne pouvons pas parvenir iusques là: et ce que nous aurons tiré contre lui ne lui apportera aucun dommage: mais il faudra que le tout retourne à nostre confusion : c'est autant comme si nous iettions des pierres sur nos testes, il faudra qu'elles retombent sur nous, et cependant nous ne pourrons pas atteindre iusques à Dieu.²²¹

He asked himself: “Se Dieu se constitue partie adverse, hélas que pourrons-nous devenir?”²²²

The same occurred in Sermon 33 when Calvin warned his listeners not to fight against God:

Gardons bien donc de nous eslever iusques-là que de combattre contre Dieu, et d'entrer en procez pour nous iustifier. Car autrement ii faudra que nostro Dieu nous confonde, et qu'il heurte tellement contre nous, que nous soyons opprimez et accablez de mille crimes, et que nous ne puissions respondre à un seul: que quand nous serons accusez de mille pechez mortels, c'est à dire, d'un nombre infini, si nous voulons avoir defense d'un seul article, nous en serons

²¹⁹ CO 35, 202

²²⁰ CO 34, 715

²²¹ CO 34, 257

²²² CO 34, 715

deboutez. Gardons (di-ie) de venir iusques-là.²²³

Calvin hadn't the slightest doubt about the outcome of this lawsuit. Ultimately God will be discharged, as he wrote in Sermon 34:

Il est vray, que les hommes cuideront avoir bonne cause de savoir faire des plaintes : et mesmes il y en a de si insensez, que quand ils auront disgorge leurs blasphemes, ils penseront avoir obtenula victoire, à l'encontre de Dieu: mais en la fin si faut-il qu'ils soyent condamnez quand Dieu voudra entrer en procez contre eux, et qu'il leur fera sentir sa vertu et sa puissance, non point une puissance tyrannique, comme ils l'ont imaginé: mais une puissance infinie, laquelle ne se monstre point à nostre sens pour dire, Dieu est-il iuste ou non selon que nous le comprenons tel? Nenni, non: mais Dieu est iuste, quand nous le voudrons condamner: comme il est dit au Pseaume 51 (v. 6). Tu seras iustifié, voire quand tu auras iugé les hommes. Les hommes donc se pourront bien rebecquer à l'encontre de Dieu: mais tant y a que toute bouche sera c)ose finalement, et que Dieu sera iustificè.²²⁴

Then, Calvin insisted, everything will find an answer: "Satan demeurera coupable en sa malice, les hommes sont redarguez et convaincus par leur conscience propre qui est leur iuge, et Dieu sera glorifié en tout ce qu'il fait."²²⁵ Despite all their strong pleas against God, they will lose the case. "Et pourquoi?" asked Calvin. "Car il se trouvera que Dieu ne nous a point traittez iniquement, qu'il n'a point mis trop de charge sur nous: c'est à dire, qu'il ne nous a point affligez outre mesure."²²⁶

Yet if Calvin condemned those who stood as God's accusers, he similarly fought against those who tried to defend God with fraudulent grounds.

²²³ CO 33, 415

²²⁴ CO 33, 428

²²⁵ CO 33, 107

²²⁶ CO 35, 174

In Sermon 49, commenting Job 13:7-8,²²⁷ he wrote:

Or venons maintenant au principal qui est ici touché. Iob dit, Qu'il parlera neantmoins à Dieu, et qu'il veut disputer contre luy: mais il reproche à ceux qui avoyent tasché de le vaincre par leurs disputes, qu'il semble qu'ils veulent parler en faveur de Dieu. Assavoir, s'il a besoin de vos mensonges? que vous veniez ici estre ses procureurs et advocats? Et Dieu a-il besoin qu'on luy favorise en telle façon ? Quand il vous viendra esprouver, pensez-vous que cela vous profite? Il faudra que vous soyez abysmez par luy, quand vous faites maintenant semblant que vous le voulez iustifier: il monstrera que telles choses luy sont detestables, et qu'il veut estre maintenu en sa propre iustice, sans emprunter des moyens pour estre absous ne des hommes ne de leurs mensonges et advertissemens qu'ils auront forgez.²²⁸

The clear teaching of the Holy Scripture couldn't be modified in a vain attempt to protect God's justice.²²⁹ This was particularly important for Calvin in regards to the doctrine of Free Will which had been employed at times in a futile effort to defend God's justice.

Or il y a des forgeurs de mensonge qui nagent entre deux eaux, et disent, Qu'il vaut mieux donc attribuer aux hommes quelque francarbitre, afin qu'ils soyent tenus coupables quand ils auront failli. Voire: mais l'Ecriture en parle autrement. Pourquoi est-ce qu'ils viennent à un tel subterfuge, si ce n'est qu'ils mentent en faveur de Dieu? Et a-il besoin de leurs mensonges? faut-il que sa

²²⁷ "Will you speak wickedly for God, and talk deceitfully for Him? Will you show partiality for Him? Will you contend for God?"

²²⁸ CO 33, 611

²²⁹ In the same Sermon Calvin deeply censured those "qui veulent favoriser à Dieu, en desguisant la doctrine de l'Ecriture sainte: comme si Dieu avoit mestier de leurs mensonges." CO 33, 616

verité soit maintenue par ce moyen-la?²³⁰

Pourquoy les hommes viennent-ils ici barbouiller? c'est, comme i'ay desia dit, qu'il leur semble qu'ils excuseront Dieu: voire? mais faut-il que Dieu emprunte nos mensonges, et que nous luy soyons advocats pleins de cavillations?

Comme nous voyons que les mauvaises causes ont besoin d'estre colorees, et qu'on y desguise tout, afin d'esblouyr les yeux des iuges tellement qu'ils ne cognoissent plus rien.²³¹

Calvin singled out another awkward attempt to defend God's justice with the use of the appeal to divine permission.'

On allegue pour response, que quand les meschans font quelque mal, Dieu ne besongne point là: mais il permet, et donne simplement le congé. Or ayant l'autorité d'empescher et la puissance, quand il le permet, n'est-ce pas autant comme s'il le faisoit? C'est donc une excuse par trop frivole, et aussi Dieu n'a que faire de nos mensonges pour maintenir sa verité et sa iustice. Il ne faut point que nous amenions de tels subterfuges pour clorre la bouche aux meschans, qui veulent blasphemer contre la sainteté de Dieu, mais c'est assez d'avoir ce que l'Ecriture sainte nous dit. Car que Dieu non seulement permette et donne le congé, mais aussi qu'il execute sa volonté et par Satan et par les meschans, il appert par ce que l'Ecriture ne dit point, Seigneur, tu l'as permis, mais tu l'as fait.²³²

The same perspective is echoed in Sermon 47:

Ceux qui veulent excuser Dieu d'iniustice alleguent pour couleur, qu'il permet

²³⁰ CO 33, 617-618

²³¹ CO 33, 618

²³² CO 33, 106. The same perspective echoed in the *Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*, where Calvin had written: "But to turn all those passages of the Scripture (wherein the affection of the mind, in the act, is distinctly described) into a mere permission on the part of God is a frivolous subterfuge and a vain attempt at escape from the mighty truth!" CO 8, 359: "frivolum est effugium."

bien ce que les hommes font, et toutesfois qu'il ne le fait pas. Mais ie vous prie, donneront-ils solution à ce passage? Car Iob apres avoir dit, Qu'il y a vertu et droiture en Dieu, adioust, Qu'en a main sont ceux qui sont trompez et ceux qui déçoivent.²³³

Calvin rejected as futile the claim that God punished every man according to his faults. He refuted this in Sermon 33, warning:

Voila donc un vice, c'est que quand on veut mesurer la iustice de Dieu, pour dire, Il n'afflige personne sinon pour ses fautes: voire, et en telle qualité, et en telle quantité comme chacun l'a offensé, il faut que Dieu luy rende en ce monde: alors on ne prend point la iustice de Dieu comme on doit.²³⁴

In one of his last sermons Calvin spoke provocatively, stating that God, rather than relying upon man, could confer upon the animals the duty of His defence.

Et cependant il monstre, que s'il lui plaist, il ne daignera nous respondre à toutes nos repliques: mais il suffira que nous soyons convaincus par les bestes brutes: et ne fust-ce que par les chevaux qui nous sont domestiques: qu'il ne faudra pas aller loin pour nous rembarrer: car Dieu aura par toutes les rues, par les champs, par les maisons des advocats qui plaideront assez bien sa cause: et ne suscitera point de grands rhetoriciens d'entre les hommes, mais (comme i'ai dit) il se contentera d'avoir les bestes. Car il armera toutes ses creatures: il aura autant d'advocats et de procureurs contre nous comme il y a d'oiseaux au ciel ou en l'air, autant qu'il y a de poissons en la mer, et autant qu'il y a de bestes sur la terre: bref, il ne faudra point que l'homme sorte hors de soy pour estre convaincu: car ne voyons-nous pas un artifice admirable de nostre Dieu en

²³³ CO 33, 587

²³⁴ CO 33, 406

chacun bout de nos doigts.²³⁵

Rather than have the defence of God's justice based on lies and compromises, Calvin countered another defence, based on a complete different attitude, in which no neutrality is possible.

Il n'y a point de neutralité, qu'il ne faut point que nous soyons moyens pour nager entre deux eaux: mais que nous soyons d'un costé ou d'autre, que nous ne fleschissions point et çà et là, mais que nous marchions droit en une vraye rondeur pour dire, Ceci est-il la cause de Dieu? il faut que nous en soyons tous advocats, et la maintenions. Y a-il une querelle que nous ayons conceue mauvaise? Y a-il quelque marque que ce soit contre la verité? Que nous taschions de la mettre bas, que cela ne se souffre point. Car si nous dissimulons, nous ne saurions nier que nous ne soyons traistres à Dieu.²³⁶

If we are able to be “zelateurs de la gloire de Dieu, enflammez d'une sainte colere,”²³⁷ as Calvin pointed out in Sermon 141, God will appoint us as His lawyers:

Tiercement, quand nous voyons que les blasphemes trottent par les ruës, et par les marchez, ou par les tavernes, qu'en cela encores nous taschions de resister tant qu'il nous sera possible, pour oster et purger du milieu de nous une telle abomination. Que donc nous ne souffrions point, entant qu'en nous sera, que le nom de Dieu soit vilipendé. Et pour conclusion, toutes fois et quantes que nous verrons le mal regner, que nous mettions barre au devant, que nous taschions de le corriger: voire, et alors Dieu nous fera cest honneur, de nous avouer pour ses procureurs et advocats. Mais si nous faisons autrement, nous donnons la cause gaignee à Satan : et sommes coupables d'avoir trahi le nom de Dieu, et

²³⁵ CO 35, 437

²³⁶ CO 34, 459

²³⁷ CO 35, 256

de n'avoir tenu conte de ce qui estoit le principal, et le devoit estre.²³⁸

Having cleared the air of any prejudicial question, Calvin was in position to enter in “*medias res*” and to come once and for all to the heart of the matter, that is to say to vindication of God’s justice.

3.6 Overview

The foregoing review has enabled us to clarify some important issues: firstly, there was the juridical framework of Calvin’s theology. If ever there was a theologian who was influenced by his legal background, it was Calvin. Secondly, there was Calvin’s standing concern to vindicate God’s justice. He used the legal skills he had acquired in the course of his legal training in order to argue as God’s lawyer. Thirdly, “in *limine litis*” there was his use of a defence based on procedural pleas. The first step of Calvin’s juridical task was to build up a defence based on questioning whether it was legitimate, according to procedural rules, to charge and to prosecute God.

In the next chapter, before entering in “*medias res*” of Calvin’s vindication of God’s justice, I will analyze the premises that Calvin assumed “*de facto*.” These premises were intended to answer to the following questions:

Does evil have a reality or is it simply a “*privatio boni*?”

How God’s Omnipotence can be conceived?

What is the sense of believing in the goodness of God?

²³⁸ CO 35, 256-257

Chapter IV

The premises of Calvin's vindication of God

Calvin's defence of God's justice would be incomprehensible without taking into account the basic tenets of his theology that can be summed up in the following three sentences:

- 1) Evil is genuine.
- 2) God rules the universe and history.
- 3) God is good.

4.1 Evil is genuine.

In his exhaustive essay *Saint Augustine dans l'oeuvre de Jean Calvin*,¹ Luchesius Smits of Louvain has underlined and fully documented the French Reformer's great indebtedness to Augustine. As a matter of fact, if one scrutinizes the entire theological corpus of Calvin, the extensive influence of Augustine appears plain. As Horton Davies pointed out, "Calvin's works reveal a total of 4,119 references to Augustine: 1175 in the *Institutes*, 2214 in other theological treatises, 504 in the commentaries, 47 in the letters, 33 in the sermons, and 146 in the letters of authors cited by Augustine

¹Luchesius Smits of Louvain, *Augustine dans l'oeuvre de Jean Calvin* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1957), p. 8

that Calvin used.”² No other theologian elicited as much esteem as Augustine whom Calvin often referred to as “totus noster.”³ Nevertheless, if Calvin’s indebtedness towards Augustine remains unquestionable, it seems to have passed unnoticed the absence of any reference of the French Reformer to the core of Augustinian theodicy, for whom evil would be a mere “privatio boni” conceived as “deprivatio,” “corruptio,” “amissio,” “vitium,” “defectus,” “indigentia” and “negatio.”⁴ The only references to the privative conception of evil shared by Augustine occur in two texts. In the first text, *The Treatise Against the Fantastic and Furious Sect of the Libertines, who are Called Spirituals*,⁵ John Calvin dissociated himself very sharply from the point of view held by this group, writing:

Quelqu’un demandera icy, quelle opinion donc ilz ont du diable. Je respons qu’ilz le nomment, et en parlent: mais c’est à leur sens. Car ilz prennent le diable, le monde, le peché pour une imagination qui n’est rien. Et disent que l’homme est tel, iusque à ce qu’il soit refondu en leur secte. Pour ceste cause ilz comprennent toutes ces choses en un mot: assavoir, Cuidier. Voulans signifier que ce ne sont que phantasies frivoles qu’on conçoit: quand on a quelque opinion du Diable ou du peché. Et non seulement ilz parlent du Diable comme des Anges, les tenans comme inspirations sans essence: mais ilz

² H. Davies, *The Vigilant God* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), p. 110

³ In *De Aeterna Praedestinatione Consensus*, Calvin wrote: “Porro Augustinus ipse adeo totus noster est, ut si mihi confessio scribenda sit, ex eius scriptis contextam proferre, abunde mihi sufficiat.” CO 08, 266. Other references quoted by L. Smits are CO 6, 287, 292, 301, 317, 319, 326, 330, 353, 359; CO 8, 266 and CO 9, 149 in *Saint Augustine dans l’œuvre de Jean Calvin*, p. 117

⁴ Augustine wrote: “And I inquired what iniquity was, and ascertained it not to be a substance, but a perversion of the will, bent aside from Thee, O God, the Supreme Substance, towards these lower things, and casting out its bowels and swelling outwardly... For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good.” Confessions 7. 16. 104. Various theologians of the past have held a privative view of evil, like Origen, *De Principiis*, II, 9, 2 and *Commentary on St. John*, II.13; Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, chapter VII and *De Incarnatione*, IV, 5 not to mention Basil the Great, *Hexameron*, homily 2, para. 4; and Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, chap. VII

⁵ Calvin, *Contre la Secte Fantastique et furieuse des Libertines que se nomment Spirituelz*, in CO 7, 149-248

veulent dire que ce sont vaines pensées, lesquelles on doit oblier comme songes.⁶

The central tenet of Libertine dogma resided in the word “cuider” which could be translated by the verb “to believe” (“croire”) or by the nouns “belief” or “opinion” (“croyance” or “opinion”). Evil is “cuider” because it is only a creation of human imagination or fantasy and doesn’t represent an autonomous reality. In Calvin’s opinion this pantheistic determinism then, as a consequence, downplayed the tragic and devastating reality of evil and made God out to be the author of sin. He tried to discredit the Libertine theology by showing its incompatibility with biblical revelation. He wrote:

Touchant du peché, ilz ne disent pas seulement que ce soit une privation du bien, mais ce leur est un cuider qui s’esvanouist et est aboly, quand on n’en faict plus de cas. Brief ilz en parlent tout ainsi que fait S. Paul des idoles. Car quand il dit; que l’idole n’est rien (1 Cor. 8, 4): il entend que cela gist en la seule apprehension qu’ont les ignorans sans raison ne fondement: pourtant qu’il n’en faut tenir compte.⁷

For Calvin was absolutely certain that evil, far from being a merely human supposition, represented a concrete entity, distinct and in absolute opposition to God, as he pointed out:

Venons maintenant à la pure doctrine de l’escriture que les Diables sont espritz malings qui nous font continuellement la guerre, pour nous mener à perdition Et comme ilz sont destinez à eternelle damnation, qu’ilz machinent tousiours de nous tirer à une mesme ruine. Item, qu’ilz sont instrumens de Tire de Dieu,

⁶ CO 7, 181

⁷ CO 7, 181

et executeurs, pour punir les incredules et rebelles, les aveuglant et exerçant sur eux une tyrannie pour les inciter à mal (Iob 1, 6. 12; 2, 1. 7; Zach. 3, 1; Matth. 4, 1; Luc 8, 29; 22, 31; Actes 7, 51; 26, 18; 2 Cor. 2, 11; I Thess. 2, 18; Iehan 8, 44; 13, 2; 1 Iehan 3)

De tout cela l'escriture est pleine et les tesmoignages sont si communs qu'il n'est ia mestier de les amener. Sinon donc qu'on vueille renoncer l'escriture, la chose est toute liquide. Mais il convient de noter icy l'astuce de Sathan. Il n'y a rien qu'il demande plus, que de nous surprendre au deprouveu. Or quel moyen a il meilleur, que de nous faire à, croire, qu'il n'est point, à, fin que nul ne se doute de luy? Parquoy nous voyons combien est à hayr ceste doctrine, non seulement d'autant qu'elle est contraire à, la verité, mais pource qu'elle est autant pernicieuse que nulle qu'on sauroit penser: en ce qu'elle tend à, exposer les povres ames au diable en proye, en faisant à croire qu'il n'y a nul ennemy spirituel, qui bataille contre nous: là où nous sommes comme brebis au milieu des loups, ou, comme l'escriture les nomme, lions rugissans (1 Pierre 5, 8).⁸

Undoubtedly *The Treatise against the Libertines* contains his most energetic rebuttal of the monistic perspective, and at the same time represents the French Reformer's greatest distance from sharing Augustine's thought.

It was very likely that in order to correct the idea that he had repudiated his great master, and desiring to correct some misunderstandings, Calvin felt obliged to go back to the subject of the reality of evil. He did so in the treatise *De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione*⁹ which was written in 1552, two years before he drafted his sermons

⁸ CO 7, 181-182

⁹ The English translation of this treatise in Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1996). The original text in CO 8, 255-256

on Job. Analysing “evil” once again, in the widest context of God’s providence, Calvin wrote:

For these ends it will be desirable to consider, in the first place, that the will of God is the great cause of all things that are done in the whole world; and yet, that God is not the author of the evils that are done therein. But I will not say with Augustine-which, however, I readily acknowledge to have been truly said by him: ‘In sin or in evil, there is nothing positive.’ For this is an acuteness of argument which, to many, may not be satisfactory.¹⁰

How is it possible to interpret this statement in the widest context of Calvin’s theology? Lange Van Ravenswaay suggested that John Calvin, being uncomfortable in criticizing his great master Augustine, tried to avoid contradicting him.¹¹ I would dare to suggest another interpretation. Calvin was very far from being tactful. In this sentence there is more than the simple desire to refrain from contradicting his great master Augustine. Calvin did acknowledge the acuteness, but not the exhaustiveness of his argument. In Calvin’s opinion the statement “in peccato, sive in malo, nihil esse positivum” didn’t speak the last word on the reality of evil, and also ran the risk of being misunderstood. Deeply convinced that evil was much more than a simple “privatio boni,” Calvin tried to reconcile two seemingly contradictory principles, namely, the idea of safeguarding God’s monopoly of power along with affirming the

¹⁰ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 233. CO 08, 353: “Primo loco videndum est, quomodo Dei voluntas rerum omnium quae in mundo geruntur causa sit : neque tamen malorum autor sit Deus. Non dicam cum Augustino, quod tamen ut vere ab eo dictum libenter amplector: In peccato, sive in malo, nihil esse positivum. Est enim argutia, quae multis non satisfaceret.”

¹¹ L. Van Ravenswaay, *Augustinus Totus Noster, das Augustin Verständnis bei Johannes Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), p. 100. He writes: “Die Formulierung zeigen deutlich, wie schwer Calvin die Kritik am Kirchenvater hier fällt und wie geschickt er sie andererseits zu verdecken sucht. Obwohl Calvins Lösung der Beschreibung des Bösen ganz anders aussieht, gibt er so dennoch vor, Augustin im Grundsatz nicht zu widersprechen.”

existence of genuine evil. In order to reach this goal he took recourse once again to Augustine:

Although, therefore, I thus affirm that God did ordain the Fall of Adam, I so assert it as by no means to concede that God was therein properly and really the author of that Fall. That I may not, however, dwell extensively on this great point now, I will only express it as my view, belief and sentiment, that what Augustine so deeply teaches on this matter was fulfilled in God's ordaining the Fall of Adam: "In a wonderful and unutterable way that was not done without the will of God (says he), which was even done contrary to His will; because it could not have been done at all, if His will had not permitted it to be done. And yet He did not permit it unwillingly, but willingly." The great and grand principle, therefore, on which Augustine argues cannot be denied: "That both man and apostate angels, as far as they were themselves concerned, did that which God willed not, or which was contrary to His will but that, as far as God's overruling omnipotence is concerned, they could not, in any manner, have done it without His will." To these sentiments of the holy man I subscribe with all my heart.¹²

This Augustinian quote occurred another time in the same treatise,¹³ as well as in other works of the French Reformer.¹⁴ The reaction to Calvin's statement was

¹² Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 126. CO 08, 315: "Quamquam sic ordinasse dico, ut eum proprie autorem fuisse non concedam. Ac ne longior sim, penitus quod Augustinus docet, impletum fuisse sentio: ut miro et ineffabili modo non fuerit praeter eius voluntatem factam, quod etiam contra eius voluntatem factum ost: quia non fieret, si non sineret. Nec utique nolens sinit, sed volens. Negari enim, quod illic principium sumit, non potest: Tam hominem quam angelos apostatas, quantum ad ipsos attinet, quod Deus noluit, fecisse: quantum vero ad Dei omnipotentiam, nullo modo efficere id valuisse. Ergo sancti viri sententiae subscribo."

¹³ Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 253: "Let that sentiment of Augustine be ever present to our minds: "Wherefore, by the mighty and marvelous working of God (which is so exquisitely perfect in the accomplishment of every purpose and bent of His will), that, in a wonderful and ineffable way is not done without His will which is even done contrary to His will, because it could not have been done had

extremely critical. As T. H. L. Parker pointed out, “Calvin was attacked in his own day for positing two wills in God, the one revealed in the Law and the Gospel, the other kept hidden from men.”¹⁵ In response to this criticism he pointed out that “God is so far from being variable, that no shadow of such variableness appertains to Him, even in the most remote degree.”¹⁶ In the *Institutes* of 1559 he went further and stressed that God does not have a twofold but a simple will. He insisted that it was only because of the weakness of our human minds that we are incapable of understanding “how God can both will and not will the same thing.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, despite his efforts to restrict the implications of the seeming existence of two divine wills, this theme emerged again in the *Sermons on Job* with the concepts of “double justice” and “double wisdom,” as we will see in the sixth chapter.

Calvin was willing to acknowledge the acuteness of Augustine’s statement, but he, unlike his great master, was extremely realistic in emphasizing the devastating and genuine reality of Evil. In Calvin’s opinion, instead of being conceived as something inexistent or being minimized as the result of a merely subjective perception, evil should be adequately understood and interpreted. For him the experience of evil was universal. In order to stress the genuine reality of evil, Calvin made use of very

He not permitted it to be done; and yet, He did not permit it without His will, but according to His will.” CO 08, 364: “Occurrat semper illud Augustini: Propterea magna opera Domini, exquisita in omnes voluntates eius, ut miro et ineffabili modo non fiat praeter eius voluntatem, quod etiam fit contra eius voluntatem: quia non fieret, si non sineret, nec utique nolens sinit, sed volens.”

¹⁴ See: CO 02, 171 and CO 09, 263

¹⁵ T.H.L.Parker, *Calvin, an Introduction to his Thought* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster: John Knox Press, 1995), p. 47

¹⁶ Hoeksema, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 99. CO 08, 301: “Atqui, hoc modo duplex affingitur Deo voluntas, qui adeo varius non est, ut ne minima quidem in eum cadat obumbratio.”

¹⁷ CO 03, 276: “Toutefois pour venir au point, ce n’est pas à dire pourtant que la volonté de Dieu repugne à, soy-mesme, ne qu’elle soit muable, ou qu’il face semblant de vouloir ce qu’il ne veut pas : mais sa volonté, laquelle est une et simple en soy, nous semble diverse, pource que selon nostre rudesse et débilité de sens, nous ne nous ne comprenons pas comment il veut et ne veut point en diverses manieres qu’une chose se face. comprenons pas comment il veut et ne veut point en diverses manieres qu’une chose se face.”

strong and unmistakable expressions. “Au monde les choses sont confuses,”¹⁸
 “l’iniquité se transporte comme sans bride, qui est comme un deluge qui s’espanche
 par tout,”¹⁹ “y ait un desordre si grand que nous en sommes estonnez, que les cheveux
 nous en dressent en la teste,”²⁰ “les meschans machinent au dedans leurs iniquitez,
 leurs trahisons, desloyautez, qu’ils inventent des fraudes, et des tromperies, et puis
 quand ils ont tout conceu, ils cherchent tous les moyens de mettre en execution leur
 mauvaise entreprinse,”²¹ “l’iniquité des hommes est si meschante, si obstince, et si
 desesperée, que tant plus que Dieu les chastie, tant plus desgorgent-ils leurs
 blasphemes, et monstrent qu’ils sont du tout incorrigibles, qu’il n’y a nul moyen de les
 amener à raison.”²²

For Calvin the continuous injustice and violence, rather than being the figment of human imagination, was the evidence that “ce monde est le regne des tenebres.”²³ In Sermon 105 the analysis of the human situation was particularly realistic:

Mais cependant nous voyons en quel temps nous sommes, car aujourd’huy
 comme il n’y a gueres de crainte de Dieu, aussi n’y a-il nulle reverence des
 hommes: l’iniquité s’est tellement desbordee, que les plus effrontez sont les
 plus vaillans. La ieunesse devroit pour le moins avoir quelque modestie: et de
 fait ce n’est point sans cause que les Payens ont cognu de leur sens naturel, que
 c’estoit une vertu propre pour l’age des ieunes gens d’avoir quelque
 vergongne. Et pourquoy ? Car les ieunes gens ne sont pas encores moderez
 comme il seroit requis: il y a ces bouillons qui les sollicitent à mal, le feu est en

¹⁸ CO 33, 477; CO 34, 220, 369, 395; CO 35, 231

¹⁹ CO 34, 220

²⁰ CO 34, 387-387

²¹ CO 33, 191

²² CO 35, 261

²³ CO 33, 477

la teste, et puis leurs cupiditez sont si violentes, qu'il est bien difficile de les reprimer. Nostre Seigneur donne un remede à cela: c'est a savoir, que les ieunes gens, encores qu'ils soyent bien estourdis, si est-ce qu'ils sont convaincus, et sont contraints à se cognoistre, ils apperçoivent qu'ils n'ont pas encores en eux une telle attrempance comme il seroit requis: et voila pourquoi ils ont quelque honte en eux. Or main tenant que voit-on? Il ne faudra que ces petites ordures: voila des escargots, incontinent qu'ils sont sortis de l'escaille il leur faut une espee au costé, les voila desnuez de toute honte: il leur semble qu'ils doivent estre comme putains de bordeau, et quoi qu'ils facent, qu'il n'y ait plus ne reverence ne iustice, ne rien qui soit, qui les doive gouverner: bref, nous voyons que la ieunesse est du tout endiablee, et que non seulement il n'y a point de crainte de Dieu, mais il n'y a plus nulle honnesteté. Quand nous voyons cela, cognoissons qu'il y a un deluge d'iniquité, et que les choses sont tellement confuses qu'il n'y a plus de remede.²⁴

What happened in the past also happens today. Instead of being a "laudator temporis acti," Calvin refused to idealize ancient times, recognizing, though, that the situation had become increasingly worse. The fact that iniquity reigns sovereign, he wrote in Sermon 91,

ne doit point nous sembler nouveau: car il en a este ainsi de tout temps. Il est certain que si nous faisons comparaison entre l'estat qui estoit du temps de Iob, et celui qui est aujourd'hui, il y avoit alors beaucoup plus d'integrité. Car nous savons que le monde empire, et que les hommes s'endurcissent à tout mal, que la corruption s'augmente de plus en plus: mais tant y a que desia du temps de Iob on voyoit les complaints qui sont ici faites: c'est assavoir, que

²⁴ CO 34, 549

les riches estoient comme des gouffres pour engloutir tout, qu'ils mangeoyent les orphelins, ils pilloyent les vefves, il n'y avoit que cruauté en eux: apres, si les povres avoyent travaillé, et que mesmes ils eussent presse l'huile en leur maison, qu'on ne laissoit point de leur venir ravir leur substance: apres avoir fait vendange, ils ne laissoient point d'avoir soif: car le vin leur estoit tiré hors des mains: voire, que la cruauté estoit iusques là, que les povres gens estoient despulliez de leurs robbes, qu'il falloit qu'ils allassent tous nuds, et qu'au lieu de leurs couëtes et coussins ils embrassassent les pierres, qu'ils dormissent à la pluye, et à la rosee de la nuict, au vent et à la froidure. Or si telles cruautez ont desia este du temps de Iob: aujourd'hui que le monde est desbordé à tout mal, que nous sommes venus au comble de toute iniquité, se faut-il esbahir s'il y a des cruautez beaucoup, si les plus forts l'emportent par la violence, et qu'il n'y ait plus ne raison, ni equité, ne droiture, que les hommes soyent comme bestes sauvages? Cela, di-ie, ne nous doit point estre nouveau, quand nous voyons que lors qu'il y avoit plus de iustice beaucoup, neantmoins telles extorsions ne laissoient parmi.²⁵

Calvin was fully aware that the wicked have been always plotting to create turmoil and that chaos and confusion were the consequence of the moral disorder that permeated history. Contrary to the opinion espoused by Paul Tillich,²⁶ Calvin was extremely sensitive to the problem of the suffering of the righteous, and took time to digress and discuss the existence of wickedness within its various contexts and

²⁵ CO 34 , 373

²⁶ "The suffering of the world is not a real problem for Calvin," P. Tillich wrote in his *The History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 266

situations.²⁷ What particularly upset him was the dimension of their machinations and the seeming silence of God, as he pointed out:

Or maintenant il reste de voir comme Dieu est iuste, et comme il gouverne le monde en equité: et toutes fois les choses sont confuses cependant. Car les meschans ont la vogue, ils oppriment, ils pillent, ils saccagent: et Dieu dissimule: et ne fait point semblant d'y prouvoir. Comment ceci s'entend-il, Que Dieu ait la conduite du monde, et que tout soit iustement disposé par lui: et toutes fois qu'on voye des troubles si grands, des iniquitez si enormes, sans qu'il y remédie?²⁸

Calvin recognized that the impunity of the wicked and the suffering of the innocent have been the most important objections to the justice of God, and this insoluble scandal caused him to raise difficult questions about it. Painfully he asked himself : “Ne faut-il que tous les meschans en soyent exterminiez?”²⁹ Où est la main de Dieu, laquelle devroit secourir les siens?”³⁰ “Et comment Dieu dissimule-il? Pourquoi est-ce qu’il permet que son Eglise soit ainsi tormentee?”³¹

Although Calvin sometimes seemed critical toward Job, he wasn’t one of those who minimized the reality of his suffering. Job was afflicted, persecuted, humiliated,

²⁷ “Our Lord has wanted to afflict His own in many places” he wrote in Sermon 3 on II Samuel. “Poor people have had their throats cut, there have been many horrible and bloody butcheries, many outrages, tyrannies and cruelties. Then the poor faithful will be expelled from their homes, and it will be much if they escape with their lives. Their goods will be seized, their wives and children will be like poor vagabonds, fleeing here and there, always in danger, like a bird on a branch.”

²⁸ CO 33, 448. See also CO 34, 480: “ayent leur recours à luy, il ne semble point qu’il les vueille secourir. On voit que les plus simples, et ceux qui ont vescu sans faire tort à nul, sont tormentez iusques au bout, et comme exposez en proye, et Dieu ne fait point semblant de les delivrer: au contraire, les meschans triomphent, ils s’endurcissent en leurs maux, et leur semble qu’ils peuvent despiter Dieu sans crainte: et Dieu dissimule tout. cela.” and CO 34, 381: “Or tant y a que de nostre costé nous ne pouvons pas tousiours marquer à l’oeil pourquoi c’est que Dieu dissimule, quand les uns pillent et ravissent, et que les autres sont despouillez de leur substance, nous ne pouvons pas voir la raison.”

²⁹ CO 33, 448

³⁰ CO 33, 614

³¹ CO 35, 139

chastened, and punished for reasons that were hidden and concealed. His torment was genuine as were the misfortunes that befell him. While emphasizing that evil is more than a mere perception, Calvin also eagerly underlined the notion that suffering didn't represent something unexpected. God never promised us that He would exempt us from trials. In Sermon 45, he highlighted this perspective by pointing out:

Notons bien donc que Dieu n'a point promis aux fideles une telle prosperité qui soit du tout exemptee en ce monde des afflictions communes, ausquelles il faut que nous soyons subiets: mais toutes telles promesses de Dieu tendent à ceste fin-la, que nous sachions que communement Dieu fera preparer ceux qui cheminent en sa crain.³²

To support further this statement Calvin added: "Dieu commence a chastier les domestiques de sa maison. Quand il exerce son iugement, il ne commencera point par les incredules."³³ Given the above-mentioned perspective, the experience of Job, then, was not isolated, but paradigmatic of the entire spectrum of human existence. Calvin conceived the life of the believers "sub specie crucis." In Sermon 6, commenting on the first chapter of Job, verses 13-29, Calvin recognized:

Si nous regardons bien quelle est la condition de nostre vie, nous trouverons, que nous sommes subiets à cent mille especes de morts, et ne saurions marcher un pas, que nous n'en soyons navrez: et nous savons bien dire que ce n'est rien que de l'homme voyant la fragilité qui est en luy.³⁴

³² CO 33, 556

³³ CO 35, 492

³⁴ CO 33, 81

Suffering is the definitive experience of our precarious lives.³⁵ “Nous sommes comme en une forest pleine de brigands,”³⁶ “subiets à cent mille especes de morts.”³⁷ “Notre vie n’est rien, et il y a cent mille morts, qui nous menacent en la plus grande vigueur que nous ayons ici bas.”³⁸

Whereas the believers are “comme un petit troupeau de brebis”³⁹ “en la gueule des loups,”⁴⁰ the wicked

sont non seulement un troupeau de loups, mais un nombre infini: le monde est plein de ceux qui ne demandent qu’à nous manger les entrailles: et ils ne se contenteroyent point de nous avoir mis simplement à mort: mais il y a une cruauté, qu’on voit bien du tout estre infernale.⁴¹

Stressing the profound realities of evil and suffering, instead of downplaying their existence, Calvin nevertheless had to sort out another and more difficult question, namely, how would one reconcile the existence of a genuine “evil” with the belief of an Omnipotent God? He tried to do so by making recourse to the principle of God’s providence.

4.2 God rules the Universe and History

³⁵ Already in *The Institutes*, Calvin expressed his point of view: “Or, en cest endroit on peut voir une singulière félicité des fidèles: la via humaine est environnée et quasi assiégée de misères infinies. Sans aller plus long, puisque nostre corps est un receptacle de mil’ maladies et mesme nourrist en soy les causes, quelque part ou aille l’homme, il porte plusieurs espèces de mort avec soy, tellement que sa vie est quasi enveloppée avec la mort. Car que dirons-nous autre chose, quand on ne peut avoir frit ne suer sans danger? Au contraire si la providence de Dieu reluyt au cœur de l’homme fidèle, non seulement il sera délivré de la crainte et destresse, de laquelle il estoit presse auparavant, mai sera relève de toute doute.” CO 03, 263

³⁶ CO 33, 72

³⁷ CO 33, 81

³⁸ CO 33, 211

³⁹ CO 33, 256

⁴⁰ CO 33, 672

⁴¹ CO 33, 256

The belief that “Dieu gouverne, et que tout est sous sa conduite et son conseil,”⁴² held an important position in the homiletics of the Reformer.⁴³ As Harold Dekker writes:

The utter Theocentricity (of his sermons) involves certain characteristic stresses in Calvin’s effort to meet the spiritual needs of God’s people. One of these is the stress on providence. The doctrine of God’s all-inclusive providence is a staple in feeding the hungry of heart. It is balm for every wound. One feels that it is basic to every sermon and it comes out in one way or another in a majority of them. Providence is understandably prominent in the sermons on Job. Job must come to rest in the ultimate goodness of the divine purpose, wrought by a strange and vexing plan.⁴⁴

Therefore, instead of being the conclusion of abstract speculation, detached from daily concerns, the doctrine of providence can be understood only in the widest context of the vindication of God’s justice. In the sixteenth century, the doctrine of providence was “under attack.”⁴⁵ Some years before, in the 1539 edition of *The Institutes* Calvin had insisted that “ignorance of providence is the greatest of miseries; the knowledge of it is attended with the highest felicity.”⁴⁶ In order to further stress its practical implications he entitled the second chapter on providence significantly:

⁴² CO, 34, 222; In Sermon 145 Calvin wrote also: “Tout est sous la main de Dieu, et que rien ne se fait que par sa volonté, et disposition.” (CO 35, 334)

⁴³ It needs only to highlight that the locution “Dieu gouverne” occurs 25 times in the *Sermons on the book of Job*: For instance in CO, 33, 257; CO, 33, 250; CO 33, 551; CO 33, 584; CO, 33, 592; CO 33, 594, CO, 33, 592; CO 33, 598; CO, 34, 20; CO, 34, 52; CO, 34, 204; CO, 34, 221; CO, 34, 222; CO, 34, 370; CO, 34, 404; CO, 34, 407; CO, 34, 428; CO 35, 70; CO 35, 246; CO 35, 254; CO 35, 255; CO 35, 256; CO 35, 266; CO 35, 334; CO 35, 478; CO 35, 483

⁴⁴ H. Dekker, *Sermons from Job*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. XXX.

⁴⁵ S. Schreiner, *The Theatre of His Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1995), pp. 16-37

⁴⁶ “Denique, ne hic diutius immorer, facile, si animadvertas, extremum esse omnium miseriarum, providentiae ignoracionem; summam beatitudinem in eiusdem cognitione esse sitam.” CO 1, 900

“How we may apply this doctrine to our benefit.”⁴⁷ In a period of time marked by calamities, revolutions and profound anxiety, he was convinced that faith in God’s governance could be a source of release and encouragement.

Calvin didn’t develop his doctrine of providence in a *vacuum*, as Gerrish reminds us: “Calvin’s doctrine of providence, so far from being inferred from the visible tokens of God’s presence, is in fact developed despite God’s hiddenness.”⁴⁸ A long series of debates had preceded him. Therefore if one wishes to understand the ‘why and wherefore’ of his opinion, one must examine how he was able to relate God’s providence to the problem of the existence of evil. In Calvin’s opinion the belief that God created the world would be incomplete and illogical without being associated with the axiom of God’s rule. The conviction that God is only a “temporary creator,” who after creation left the world and history to go their own way, would not only portray a crude and cold description of God’s creative work, but also would imperil His honor, since it would imply the existence of another god.

Sermon 130 depicts this point of view particularly clearly:

Quand donc nous appellons Dieu Createur du ciel et de la terre, ne restraignons point cela à un moment: mais cognoissons que Dieu ayant basti le monde, aujourd’huy a tout en sa puissance, et qu’il dispose des choses d’ici bas, tellement qu’il a le soin de nous, et que les cheveux de nostre teste sont contez, qu’il guide nos pas, que rien n’advient qui ne soit decreté par son conseil. Or notamment il est dit, qu’outre luy nul n’est ordonné sur le monde, nul n’est mis sur la terre: c’est pour signifier que ce sont deux choses coniointes que la creation et le gouvernement du monde. Si donc nous imaginons que Dieu ne

⁴⁷ “Quel est le but de ceste doctrine, pour en bien faire nostre profit.” CO 3, 249

⁴⁸ Brian A. Gerrish, “To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” p. 142

gouverne point tout, mais qu'il advienne quelque chose par fortune: il s'ensuit que ceste fortune est une deesse qui aura créé une partie du monde, et que la louange n'en est pas deuë à lui seul. Et voila un blaspheme execrable si nous pensons que le diable puisse rien sans le congé de Dieu, c'est autant comme si nous le faisons createur du monde en partie. Ainsi apprenons, qu'il y a un lien inseparable de ces deux choses, c'est assavoir, Que Dieu a tout fait, et qu'il gouverne tout.⁴⁹

Calvin was fully aware that one of the critical temptations to which believers might succumb, when they were suffering without apparent reason, was nihilism. In Sermon 91 he singled out this state of mind:

I'ay desia dit, que c'est une tentation bien mauvaise aux fideles, quand les choses sont confuses au monde, et qu'il semble que Dieu ne s'en mesle plus : mais que fortune gouverne et domine. Et voila qui a esté cause de ces proverbes diaboliques, Que tout se demené par cas fortuit, Qu'il y a une conduite aveugle des choses, et que Dieu se iouë des hommes comme de pelotes, qu'il n'y a ne raison ne mesure, ou bien que tout se gouverne par quelque nécessité secrete, et que Dieu ne daigne pas penser de nous. Voila ces blasphemes qui ont regné de tout temps. Et pourquoi? Car (comme i'ay desia dit) le sens humain s'esblouit, quand nous voulons iuger des choses confuses, et qui outrepassent nostre iugement et raison.⁵⁰

Calvin sought to avoid the risk that God be conceived deistically, as an impersonal and distant entity. Faith in creation implies a belief in divine governance. Nothing happens by chance. God's decision, alone, is the basis of everything that

⁴⁹ CO 35, 151

⁵⁰ CO 34, 371

occurs in the world. God is the cause and source of all motion and there is not multiplicity of decisions-makers. God is creating continuously and He is in control of both the universe and history, permanently. Consequently, the three aspects wherein God's providence could be substantiated were, in Calvin's opinion, creation ("creatio"), preservation ("sustentatio") and government ("gubernatio").

"Rebis sic stantibus," any form of contingency was completely excluded.

There is no room for accident or chance. There are no mere contingencies or possibilities relative to God. For Calvin, the need to deny Epicureism was essential for the Christian faith. As Torrance Kirby pointed out, for Calvin "to affirm Epicurus's swerve is to deny that all events are governed by the secret counsel of God, and is tantamount to atheism. This doubtless accounts for Calvin's vituperative dismissal of Lucretius as 'that filthy dog.'"⁵¹ Calvin repeatedly pointed out that "Dieu ne seroit pas tout-puissant, si les choses se faisoient en ce monde contre sa volonté, et sans qu'il s'en mesle,"⁵² and held as unacceptable and even blasphemous, the idea that historical events could happen fortuitously:

Or notamment il est dit, qu'outre luy nul n'est ordonné sur le monde, nul n'est mis sur la terre: que la creation et le gouvernement du monde. Si donc nous imaginons que Dieu ne gouverne point tout, mais qu'il advienne quelque chose par fortune: il s'ensuit que ceste fortune est une deesse qui aura créé une partie du monde, et que la louange n'en est pas deuë à lui seul. Et voila un blaspheme execrable si nous pensons que le diable puisse rien sans le congé de Dieu, c'est autant comme si nous le faisons createur du monde en partie. Ainsi

⁵¹ ICR I. 5. 5. "Stoic and Epicurean? Calvin's Dialectical Account of Providence in the *Institute*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 5. 3 (2003): 309

⁵² CO, 33, 586

apprenons, qu'il y a un lien inseparable de ces deux choses, c'est assavoir, Que Dieu a tout fait, et qu'il gouverne tout.⁵³

Everything is in the hands of a loving Father who takes care of us.

En quoy il signifie, que nous ne sommes pas ici conduits par fortune ni à l'aventure. La raison? Dieu a ordonné de ce qui sera de nous. Quand il nous a mis au monde, ce n'a pas esté pour nous ietter là comme à l'abandon, et que nous cheminions à l'aventure: mais il a establi de nostre vie et de nostre mort ce qui en sera. Cognoissons donc que nous cheminons tellement sous la conduite de nostre Dieu, qu'il ne peut tomber un cheveu de nostre teste (comme dit nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ) sinon par sa bonne volonté. Car si sa providence s'estend iusques aux passereaux, et aux vers de la terre: et que sera-ce de nous, lesquels il prise beaucoup plus, comme de fait il nous a creés et formés à son image et semblance? Yoilà donc un article que nous devons bien noter, c'est assavoir qu'un chacun de nous a son decret: c'est à dire, que quand Dieu nous a mis en ce monde, il a quant et quant ordonné ce qu'il veut qu'il soit fait de nous: et qu'il conduit nos pas tellement que nostre vie n'est pas en nostre main non plus que nostre mort: et que nous aurons beau entreprendre ceci et cela: car au lieu d'avancer nous reculerons, sinon que Dieu nous guide.⁵⁴

All natural events, even the movements of stars, are not due to causes operating independently of God, but to the incessant action of God's will.⁵⁵ Every fact, every seeming irrelevant event proceeds necessarily from God's will. On the basis of these premises Calvin was adamant when confronting his listeners with the dreadful

⁵³ CO, 35, 152

⁵⁴ CO 34, 361

⁵⁵ CO 35, 401-402

consequences that would have resulted from the negation of God's providence. If divine providence hadn't existed, the world would have decayed early and come to nothing, as he pointed out in Sermon 130: "Nous voyons donc, que les creatures ne demeurent point en leur estre, sinon d'autant qu'il plaist à Dieu de les soustenir: si tost qu'il aura recueilli ceste vertu, voila tout qui est reduit à neant."⁵⁶ The apparent reign of confusion points to the larger question of the intelligibility of providence. Even admitting that human beings could sometimes understand God's governance, Calvin constantly refused to consider providence as an empirical doctrine.⁵⁷ It was for this reason that he strongly criticized the opinion of Job's friends. The judgements of God could not be perceived and understood clearly. While the righteous suffer, the wicked thrive and have success. Although "the universe reflects the glory of God," as S. Schreiner pointed out, history "is awash in blood."⁵⁸

Although Calvin didn't go into detail in his *Sermons on Job* about the way God's providence operates, he assumed *de facto* the distinction he had already made in his treatise *Contre la secte phantastique et furieuse des libertines* between a general providence and a particular providence. The idea of ascribing to God every natural event found its highest expression when he preached on Job 12:15:

Behold, he withholdeth the waters, and they dry up: also he sendeth them out, and they overturn the earth. Or notamment Iob parle de retenir les eaux et de les lascher, pource que nous ne cognoissons point assez la main de Dieu, quand elle besoine d'une façon egale et qui nous est accoustumee. Le soleil se leve-il du matin? ce nous est une chose ordinaire, nous n'y pensons point,

⁵⁶ CO 35, 154

⁵⁷ Schreiner, "Through a mirror dimly, Calvin's Sermons on Job," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 180

⁵⁸ Schreiner, "Through a mirror dimly, Calvin's Sermons on Job," 183

et n'en "sommes point assez resveillez. pour venir iusques à Dieu. Fait-il quelque pluye? cela ne vient en nos esprits. Quand nous voyons la pluye, si on nous interrogué qui l'envoyé, nous confesserons bien que c'est Dieu: mais tant y a que ceste consideration n'entre point au vif en nous, et pour cela nous ne sommes point touchez pour nous humilier sons la providence de Dieu, cognoissans que tout est en sa main, et qu'il dispose de nostre vie: ii en y a bien peu qui pensent à cela. Ainsi donc Iob a ici choisi des oeuvres qui nous sont plus rares, qui ne sont point tant accoustumees aux hommes. Apres quand nous voyons une secheresse qui dure, alors chacun est touché: s'il fait beau temps, et que cependant on ait quelque pluye, et que la terre ne seche point du tout, on n'y pense pas: mais s'il y vient une si grande secheresse, qu'on apperçoive, les bleds ne peuvent pas croistre, ils ne profitent point, voila les semences qui sechent en terre, et qui perissent, ii n'y a fruict qui y puisse venir. Quand donc il y a une telle secheresse qui vient outre la coustume: alors nous voila touchez. Autant en est-il des grosses eaux. S'il fait quelques pluyes, et qu'elles ne nuisent point: et bien, cela nous passe, nous ne regardons point à Dieu : mais s'il y a des pluyes qui continuent, tellement que toutes les rivières se desbordent, qu'il semble que ce soit une espece de deluge: alors nous notons et marquons cela. C'est ce que Iob a voulu dire, Quand telles choses adviendront qu'il semblera que Tordre de nature vueille changer, qu'il y aura des secheresses si excessives qu'il semble que tout doive brusler: cognoissons que Dieu n'a point lasché la bride à fortune: mais que c'est luy qui besongne ainsi. Quand aussi il envoye des pluyes si grandes qu'on cuidera que tout doive perir, sachons que c'est Dieu qui besongne.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ CO 33, 583-584

He repeatedly warned, “Dieu est par-dessus tout cest ordre commun de nature, tellement qu’i peut besongner d’une façon qui nous est estrange et nouvelle.”⁶⁰

In Sermon 96, the French Reformer, after having stated “que Dieu est par dessus l’ordre de nature,” wrote:

Et d’autant plus nous faut-il bien estre advertis quand nous voyons les changemens au ciel et en terre, de noter ce qui nous est ici monsté. Dieu feroit bien que le temps seroit tousiours couvert, ou bien que le ciel seroit tousiours serain, qu’il n’y auroit iamais nuee. Or veut-il qu’il y ait des changemens: car nous serions endormis quand les choses continueroient en un estat: il nous sembleroit que c’est fortune qui gouverne: mais en telle varieté nous sommes contraints (vueillions ou non) de penser que la main de Dieu besongne, et qu’il n’est point oisif au ciel, et qu’il n’a point seulement une fois créé le monde, pour puis apres le laisser là: mais qu’il dispose tout, et qu’il a une conduite telle de ses creatures, qu’il veut que nous sentions qu’il nous est prochain.⁶¹

Excluded by the order of nature, the chance played no role, neither in the events of history, nor in human lives. This conviction found expression in Sermon 48:

Comme nous vismes hier que Dieu a en sa main ceux qui deçoivent, et ceux qui sont trompez, aussi maintenant Iob poursuit à declarer que les changemens et revolutions qu’on voit au monde ne viennent point par cas fortuit: mais que c’est Dieu qui le dispose ainsi, et qu’il faut que nous cognoissions quand le monde est ainsi troublé qu’il y a une bride secrette d’enhaut, que les choses ne sont iamais si confuses que Dieu n’ordonne par dessus comme bon luy semble.

⁶⁰ CO 34, 281, 432

⁶¹ CO 34, 432-433

Or il prend les choses plus notables, afin que là nous puissions mieux
 appercevoir la providence de Dieu.⁶²

Keenly aware that the term “general providence,” used in his previous treatise against the Libertines, could give the impression that only the major historical events are under the providence of God, the French Reformer stressed that every single creature, as well as every futile event of human life remain under Divine protection: “Et ainsi nous avons une doctrine bien utile en ce passage, pour nous monstrier comme nous n’irons point à perdition: c’est nous tenans comme serrez sous les ailes de Dieu, estans conioints à luy, afin d’obeir à sa volonté.”⁶³

Far from disagreeing with the idea of a general providence where God sustains the universe, Calvin was firmly convinced God rules not only the most important events of history but even the lives and destinies of human beings, taking care for each individual creature. He wrote:

Nous avons veu par ci devant quelle estoit la vie et conversation de Iob entre les hommes: maintenant il nous est déclaré comme Dieu a disposé de luy, afin que nous sachions, que vivans ici bas, nous ne sommes point gouvernez par fortune, mais que Dieu a l’oeil sur nous, et qu’il y a toute autorité, comme aussi c’est bien raison, veu quenous sommes ses creatures.⁶⁴

By rejecting chance and stressing that God was not “oisif,”⁶⁵ Calvin emphasized that divine governance covers the entire spectrum of events both natural and historical. And in doing so, he kept two basic biblical principles: God rules and governs nature and history, but at the same time is distinct from them. With the first

⁶² CO 33, 593

⁶³ CO 35, 181

⁶⁴ CO 33, 57

⁶⁵ CO 33, 58; CO 33, 194; CO 34, 174 and 432

principle he attacked the Epicureans, who hold that world is floating randomly⁶⁶. With the second principle he distanced himself from the Stoics who identified God with natural processes. In Calvin's opinion God ruled creation, but He didn't identify with it.

4.2.1 Evil is not out of God's control

If his conviction that God's providential governance and the ordination of every event could give comfort, it was doomed to leave unsolved other, more sensitive questions. If God ruled everything in history, then He would have to bear responsibility for every awful event that has occurred. In Sermon 40 this question was posed very forcefully:

Il est dit que Dieu dispose toutes choses en ce monde. Et bien, est-il possible que quand il se meine des guerres, Dieu les suscite? Que Dieu conduise ceux qui sont agitez de passions enragees: comme nous voyons les princes, qui sont pleins d'ambition, ou avarice, qui espandent le sang, qui pillent, qui ravissent, tellement qu'il y a une confusion infernale, et que ceux qui les vont servir là ne font nulle conscience ne scrupule de tuer, de violer, de piller? Voila donc les hommes qui sont comme bestes sauvages, et pires encores. Et que Dieu use de tels instrumens? Et comment cela se peut-il faire? Apres, nous voyons que l'Eglise mesme est tourmentée: voila les persecutions qui se dressent: et qui est-ce qui les suscite? Apres nous voyons que la doctrine de l'Evangile sera

⁶⁶ P. H. Reardon summed up the distinction between these two philosophies. "The Epicureans lived in a world in which they were totally free, because there was neither meaning nor pattern in which to work out the terms of one's existence. They were like men at sea on a boat with no shore. The Stoics inhabited a world in which there was, if you will, too much meaning. Man could put no more in it. Everything was programmed and happened on schedule. They were like men in a boat tied at the shore. The Epicureans could go nowhere, as there was nowhere to go. The Stoics could go nowhere, because their craft was tied in a cosmological blueprint." In "Calvin on Providence: The Development of the Insight," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975): p. 525

comme ruinee par la tyrannie des meschans, que les mensonges regneront au lieu de la verité. Et qui est ce qui fait de tels troubles?⁶⁷

Calvin often recognized how uncomfortable it was for him to consider that “Dieu fait le bien et le mal.”⁶⁸ He asked himself:

Au reste on pourroit encores esmouvoir beaucoup de questions. Comment? Est-il possible que Dieu se serve de Satan? Il n’y a que malice en luy. Et d’autre costé voila un meschant qui n’aura autre intention que de pervertir tout bien et le destruire: et qu’il le face, et qu’il en vienne à bout: ne semble-il pas qu’il soit absout, d’autant qu’il a servi à la volonté de Dieu?⁶⁹

Notwithstanding, Calvin never tired of emphasizing the monopoly of God’s power and His subsequent responsibility, stating that even evil and sinful human acts are controlled by God.

The starting point for his reflection on this theme was taken from the first chapter of the Book of Job in which it is said that Satan “came to present himself before the Lord.”

Et au reste quand il est dit, Que Satan est aussi venu parmi les Anges, ce n’est pas qu’il se soit insinué là, comme aucuns l’ont entendu, pour faire du bon valet, qu’il se mette là en la troupe: mais au contraire le S. Esprit nous a voulu signifier, que non seulement les Anges de paradis, qui obeissent à Dieu de leur bon gré, et qui sont du tout enclins et adonnez à cela, lui rendent conte, mais aussi les diables d’enfer, qui luy sont ennemis et rebelles tant qu’il leur est possible, qui taschent de ruiner sa maiesté, qui machinent à brouiller tout: qu’il faut que ceux-la (en despit de leurs dents) soyent subiets à Dieu, et qu’ils

⁶⁷ CO 33, 503

⁶⁸ CO 33, 450

⁶⁹ CO 33, 589

lui rendent conte de tout ce qu'ils font, et qu'ils ne puissent rien attenter sans sa permission et son congé.⁷⁰

Calvin gave further details of the character of Satan's subjection to God when he wrote:

Mais les diables obeissent à Dieu, comme forçaires, c'est à dire, non point de leur bon gré, mais d'autant que Dieu les y contraint: ils voudroyent bien resister à sa vertu, et l'opprimer s'ils pouvoient, mais il faut qu'ils suivent par tout là où il les veut mener. Et voila pourquoy notamment les Anges sont appelez (en ce passage) Enfans de Dieu, et le diable a son titre d'adversaire: car Satan signifie cela en Hebrieu.⁷¹

The power that God assigns to Satan is never out of His control and will not last indefinitely.⁷² Satan and the demons are bridled by God, as Calvin noted further along in that passage:

Ainsi donc c'est l'un des articles le plus necessaire que nous ayons, de savoir que le diable est tenu en bride, et quelque chose qu'il soit enragé contre nostre salut, que neantmoins il ne peut rien faire sinon d'autant qu'il luy est permis d'enhaut. Et aussi l'Escripture nous dit bien tous les deux, c'est assavoir que Satan est le prince du monde, qu'il a son empire en l'air par dessus nous, et que nous ne pouvons rien, qu'il nous peut devorer que nous luy sommes

⁷⁰ CO 33, 58

⁷¹ CO 33, 59

⁷² CO 33, 77: "Quand Dieu permet une telle vogue à Satan sur ses fideles ce n'est que pour peu de temps." CO 33, 61. On this point Calvin returned innumerable times: See: CO 33, 23, 71, 81, 103, 462; It need also to remind that the word "bride" occurs 274 times most of them in connection with the name of Satan.

comme subiets, que nous sommes ses esclaves de nature, tenus en ses liens: et que luy toutesfois est subiet à Dieu maugré qu'il en ait.⁷³

A man of order, the French Reformer feared chaos. God ruled history and the universe, otherwise life would be unbearable. In what condition would we be, he asked himself, if Satan were free to act against us?

Si donc les diables n'estoient point subiets à Dieu, et qu'ils peussent attenter ce que bon leur semble, et qu'ils eussent une licence desbordee, et que Dieu ne les retinst point, hélas! nostre condition seroit bien miserable: car nousserions exposez en proye sans aucun remede. Et où seroit nostre foy? quelle certitude aurions-nous d'estre gardez? car nostre ennemi est trop puissant.⁷⁴

And yet Calvin didn't limit himself to the statement that Satan was controlled by God, but went further and affirmed unequivocally that evil came almost exclusively from the hands of God and attributed Him every responsibility, as he stressed:

Or en premier lieu nous avons à noter quant à nos afflictions, combien que Dieu les envoie, et qu'elles procedent de luy, toutefois que le diable cependant nous les suscite, comme aussi Saint Paul nous advertit, que nous avons la guerre contre les puissances spirituelles. (Eph. 6, 12)⁷⁵

The best expression of his attitude is the phrase that he repeatedly pronounced before he died "Seigneur, tu me piles, mais il me suffit que c'est ta main."⁷⁶ He felt that Satan could do nothing without God's authorization and that we should thank God that his power was limited.

⁷³ CO 33, 61

⁷⁴ CO 33, 61

⁷⁵ CO 33, 24

⁷⁶ CO 21, 44

Car si la puissance de Satan n'estoit point limitee, il auroit incontinent la vogue sur nous. Nous savons qu'il ne demande que nostre perdition, comme aussi il est nostre ennemi mortel, ainsi qu'il en est parlé en d'autres passages, qu'il circuit comme un lion bruyant (1. Pier. 5, 8), il est tousiours apres la proye pour la devorer. Si donc les diables n'estoient point subiets à Dieu, et qu'ils peussent attenter ce que bon leur semble, et qu'ils eussent une licence desbordee, et que Dieu ne les retinst point, hélas! nostre condition seroit bien miserable: car nous serions exposez en proye sans aucun remede.⁷⁷

Given this perspective, Calvin regarded Satan and the demons as mere executors, rods and instruments of the judgements of God.⁷⁸ The conviction that "Dieu tiens la bride à Satan, et à tous les siens, et que non seulement ils ne puissent remuer un doigt contre nous,"⁷⁹ so that evil and suffering would never leave the control of God's hands, turned out to be a source of release, as Calvin stressed in Sermon 48:

Au reste notons que ceste doctrine nous apporte grande consolation, moyennant que nous la puissions appliquer à nostre usage. Quand il est dit, Qu'à Dieu appartiennent ceux qui faillent et ceux qui deçoivent, par cela nous cognoissons que Dieu tient la bride à Satan et à tous seducteurs: que sans sa volenté nous ne pouvons estre tormentez ne de fausses doctrines ne d'heresies, ne d'autres zizanies qui sont pour nous divertir de la pureté de l'Evangile. Et pourquoy? Or Dieu tient en sa main ceux qui deçoivent: voire, depuis Satan qui est leur chef, iusques à ceux desquels il se sert. Puis que Dieu les tient ainsi en sa main, sinon qu'il leur lasche la bride, il est certain qu'ils ne pourront rien

⁷⁷ CO 33, 61

⁷⁸ "Les diables sont comme bourreaux pour executer les iugemens de Dieu, et les punitions qu'il veut faire sur les meschants: ils sont aussi comme verges, par lesquelles Dieu chastie ses enfans. Brief, il faut que le diable soit instrument de l'ire de Dieu, et qu'il execute sa volenté." CO 33, 75

⁷⁹ CO 34, 15

attenter. Et encores qu'ils attendent, si est-ce qu'ils n'auront point d'avantage sur nous, d'autant que ceux qui sont deceus sont en la main de Dieu. Or puis que nous sommes en sa main, remettons nous à luy : et il ne permettra point que nous soyons du nombre de ceux que Satan suppedite: mais nous serons tousiours victorieux par dessus les mensonges qu'il nous viendra mettre en avant. Voila comme nous devons pratiquer ceste doctrine.⁸⁰

The core of Calvin's perspective lies within the word "consolation." It nurtured his unceasing optimism which prompted him to say: "Dieu a des moyens qui nous sont incomprehensibles pour secourir aux siens."⁸¹

4.2.2 God not only permits, but also wills evil

If the doctrine of Providence had the advantage of giving comfort, it also ran into deep difficulties. If whatever happened in the universe was governed by God's incomprehensible will, then God was indictable for the evil that is in the world.

Calvin had two choices: either attribute the existence of evil to God's permissiveness concerning Satan's activity, or admit that God causes evil. Unwilling to draw back from his premises, Calvin choose the second solution. Already in the *Treatise Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* he had labelled the attempt to defend God's justice by an appeal to divine permission a "frivolous refuge."⁸²

In the first sermon on the second chapter on the book of *Job* he came back to this subject and sharply criticized the principle that God simply permitted evil:

⁸⁰ CO 33, 591

⁸¹ CO 33, 201

⁸² Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 201: "But to turn all those passages of the Scripture (wherein the affection of the mind, in the act, is distinctly described) into a mere permission on the part of God is a frivolous subterfuge, and a vain attempt at escape from the mighty truth."

Or il semble à d'aucuns qu'ils ont beaucoup gagné quand ils auront trouvé quelques disputations frivoles, pour dire que Dieu ne fait pas toutes choses, lesquelles se font et par Satan, et par les méchans. On allegue pour response, que quand les meschans font quelque mal, Dieu ne besongne point là: mais il permet, et donne simplement le congé. Or ayant l'autorité d'empescher et la puissance, quand il le permet, n'est-ce pas autant comme s'il le faisoit? C'est donc une excuse par trop frivole, et aussi Dieu n'a que faire de nos mensonges pour maintenir sa verité et sa iustice. Il ne faut point que nous amenions de tels subterfuges pour clorre la bouche aux meschans, qui veulent blasphemer contre la sainteté de Dieu, mais c'est assez d'avoir ce que l'Ecriture sainte nous dit. Car que Dieu non seulement permette et donne le congé, mais aussi qu'il execute sa volonté et par Satan et par les meschans, il appert par ce que l'Ecriture ne dit point, Seigneur, tu l'as permis, mais tu l'as fait: comme David quand il confesse ses pechez et transgressions, quand Dieu l'a si grievement puni, il dit (Pse. 39, 10), Seigneur, de qui me plaindray-ie? car ie voy que c'est ta main: et toutesfois David estoit persecuté par les meschans: il appelle cela la main de Dieu. Voila comme le Seigneur mesmes en parle: voulons nous estre plus sages que luy ? luy serons nous à croire qu'il a besoin de nos belles couleurs afin de l'asseurer, qu'on ne luy puisse faire nulles reproches?⁸³

In Sermon 48, after having emphasized that “nous semble contre toute raison, que Dieu ait en sa main ceux qui trompent et qu'il les pousse à cola”⁸⁴ he stated:

⁸³ CO 33, 106

⁸⁴ CO 33, 585

Ceux qui veulent excuser Dieu d'iniustice alleguent pour couleur, qu'il permet bien ce que les hommes font, et toutesfois qu'il ne le fait pas. Mais ie vous prie, donneront-ils solution à ce passage? Voila Iob qui approuve la puissance de Dieu, et comme il a le regime du monde, quand il dit, Qu'en sa main sont ceux qui sont trompez et ceux qui trompent. S'il y avoit une simple permission, Iob auroit bien mal parlé. Il faut donc conclure, que Dieu a tellement la conduite de tout, que rien ne se fait sinon d'autant qu'il l'a ordonné.... Nous voyons bien donc maintenant, Dieu ne se retire point en un anget, pour dire, Je laisserai faire: mais qu'il ordonne, qu'il dispose. Car sans cela (comme i'ay dit) il ne seroit point tout-puissant.⁸⁵

In this sermon we find the most articulated explanation of Calvin's perspective on God's responsibility. Having begun with the assumptions that "il est certain que Satan avoit fait tout cest orage, que Iob fust despouillé de sa substance, et que ses enfans mourussent,"⁸⁶ Calvin echoed the question he'd already raised in the *Institutes*:⁸⁷

Pourquoy donc est-ce qu'il attribue cela à Dieu? mesmes nous avons veu par ci devant que les brigans et voleurs luy avoyent ravi son bien : faut-il que Dieu soit declaré auteur d'une telle volerie, et brigandage ? Il semble qu'on le vueille envelopper parmi les pechez des hommes: car nous ne pouvons pas excuser ceux qui sont venus envahir la substance, et le bestail de Iob.⁸⁸

The answer sounded clear and unequivocal:

⁸⁵ CO 33, 587-588

⁸⁶ CO 33, 104

⁸⁷ "Comment pourrons-nous dire qu'une mesme œuvre ait esté faite de Dieu, du diable et des hommes, que nous n'excusions le diable entant qu'il semble conioint avec Diéu: ou bien que nons ne disions Dieu estre autheur du mal?" CO 03, 355

⁸⁸ CO 33, 104

Voila des brigands que nous pouvons condamner, et toutesfois Iob ne dit pas, c'est Satan qui m'a ainsi tout ravi, ce sont les brigans qui m'ont despouillé: il dit, C'est Dieu qui l'a fait. Iob blaspheme il en parlant ainsi? Non, car Dieu approuve son dire, comme desia nous avons veu, qu'il n'a rien attribué à Dieu, qui fust hors de raison. Il a confessé que Dieu estoit iuste et equitable, et l'a glorifié comme il appartenoit: si est-ce neantmoins qu'il prononce, que c'est Dieu qui a fait ce qu'ont fait les brigands, et ce qu'aussi a fait le diable. Or donc nous voyons ici comme Dieu tousiours est en degré souverain pour conduire les choses qui se font ici bas, et pour les disposer, afin de les amener à telle issue, que bon luy semble.⁸⁹

The sentence "Dieu qui a fait ce qu'ont fait les brigands, et ce qu'aussi a fait le diable"⁹⁰ represented his most radical answer to the problem of the origin of evil.⁹¹ God's purposes are, by definition, always good and just. Therefore, He is not indictable when He uses evil instrumentally.⁹²

Paul Tillich commented:

⁸⁹ CO 33, 104

⁹⁰ One finds the same sentence in CO 42, 169: "que nous sachions que les afflictions et miseres, et calamités, n'adviennent pas sans la volonté de Dieu, sans sa providence et conseil, voila pour le premier, que nous disions avec Iob, c'est le Seigneur, avec David, Seigneur, tu l'as fait, avec Ezechias."

⁹¹ In other works Calvin was more explicit, with the possible exception of Sermon 83 on II Samuel quoted by R. Stauffer in *Dieu, la Creation et la Providence dans la Predication de Calvin* (Bern, Peter Lang, 1978) p. 197. On other occasions Calvin gave a more careful answer. For instance in Sermon 18 on the letter to Ephesians in response to the question "comment est-il possible que Dieu ne soit meslé parmi les pecheurs, et qu'il ne soit autheur de mal, quand il se sert ainsi et de Satan et de tous les meschans, et qu'il les employe pour s'eslever les uns contre les autres? et comment est-il possible qu'il n'en soit coupable" he confined himself to suggest sobriety: "Quand donc toutes ces fantasies-là nous viendront au devant, ou que ces chiens qui desgorgent ainsi leurs blasphemes contre Dieu viendront nous assaillir, que nous soyons munis de sobriété, sçachans ce qui nous est ici dit, c'est à sçavoir que la sagesse de Dieu est diverse en plusieurs sortes: et si sa volonté est diverse en plusieurs façons, que neantmoins elle est tousiours une." CO 51, 465. Richard Stauffer also quotes the Sermon 36 on II Samuel (*Supplementa Calviniana*, 1, p. 317-318) in which Calvin seems to take a more prudent attitude: "Comment ont esté robez ses biens, ses maisons ruinées et tout ce qu'il avoit, mis en proye? Dieu l'a fait par la main des brigandz. Et en cela dirons nous que Dieu soit contamaine? Nenni."

⁹² See *Supplementa Calviniana*, p. 476, quoted by R. Stauffer, in *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 278

Such statements which seem to make God the cause of evil, are understandable only if we understand what Calvin says, that the world is ‘the theatre of the Divine glory.’ In the scene which we call ‘the world,’ God shows His glory. In order to do this, He causes evil, even moral evil. Calvin says: to think that God admits evil because of freedom, is frivolous. Because God acts in everything that goes on; the evil man follows the will of God although he does not follow His command. By following His will they defy His command, and that makes them guilty.⁹³

Having determined that evil was not initiated by Satan, the task of defending God’s justice became more difficult: If God’s power is without limits, wasn’t God a tyrant?

4.3 God is just and good

In order to demonstrate that God, far from being a tyrant, was just and good, Calvin couldn’t ignore the theological voluntarism with which Calvin’s theology has been often associated.⁹⁴ Although the influence of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham on Calvin’s thought is now widely accepted, there has remained substantial disagreement regarding its extent and its significance, especially with reference to the distinction between “*potentia Dei absoluta*” (God’s absolute power) and “*potentia Dei ordinata*” (God’s ordained power), that is to say between what God can do in view of His sheer and unlimited ability to act and what He has chosen to do in the light of His wise and sometimes inscrutable purposes. Albrecht Ritschl expressed the opinion that

⁹³ P. Tillich, *The History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 266

⁹⁴ Alister McGrath, “John Calvin and Late Medieval Thought,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 77 (1986) and *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), pp. 81-84, 128; Bernard Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (London: Longman, 1981), pp. 187-88; and Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, (London: Collins, 1963), pp. 127-129

the French Reformer stood in the voluntarist tradition of Scotus and Ockham, inasmuch as the notion of God informing his doctrine of double predestination would lead to the idea of “*potentia absoluta*” conceived as synonymous with sheer caprice and of total “*arbitrium*.”⁹⁵ This conclusion, drawn from selections of the *Institutes of Christian Religion*⁹⁶ and from the commentaries, has been deeply questioned by Reinhold Seeberg⁹⁷ who clearly demonstrated that “*diese potentia absoluta Gottes hat zur Schranke nur das logisch Unmögliche sowie das eigene Wesen Gottes oder seine bonitas.*”⁹⁸

Calvin had chance to dwell frequently on the distinction between “*potentia absoluta*” and “*potentia ordinata*,” especially during the period from 1551 to 1563, in his commentaries on Gen. 18:13, Gen. 25:29, Rom. 9:19⁹⁹, Isa. 23:9,¹⁰⁰ not to

⁹⁵ A. Ritschl, “Geschichtliche Studien zur christlichen Lehre von Gott” in *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie* 1865-1868, Gesammelte Aufsätze, Neue Folge (1896): 25-176.

⁹⁶ “Premierement, ils demandent à quel propos Dieu se courrouce contre ses creatures, lesquelles ne l’ont provoqué par aucune offense; car de perdre et ruiner ceux que bonr luy semble, c’est chose plus convenable à la cruauté d’un tyran, qu’à la droiture d’un Iuge. Ainsi il leur semble que les hommes ont bonne cause de se plaindre de Dieu, si par son pur vouloir, sans leur propre merite, ils sont predestinez à la mort éternelle. Si telles cogitations viennent quelquefois en l’entendement des fideles, ils seront assez armez pour les repousser, quand seulement ils reputeront quelle temerité c’est mesme d’enquerir des causes de la volonté de Dieu, veu qu’icelle est, et à bon droict doit estre la cause de toutes les choses qui se font. Car si elle a quelque cause, il faut que ceste cause-là precede, et qu’elle soit comme attachée à icelle: ce qu’il n’est licite d’imaginer; car la volonté de Dieu est tellement la reigle supreme et souveraine de iustice, que tout ce qu’il veut, il le faut tenir pour iuste, d’autant qu’il le veut. Pourtant quand on demande, Pourquoi est-ce que Dieu a fait ainsi? Il faut respondre, Pource qu’il l’a voulu. Si on passe outre, en demandant, Pourquoi Pa-il voulu? c’est demander une chose plus grande et plus haute que la volonté de Dieu: ce qui ne se peut trouver.” *ICR*, III, 23, 2

Francois Wendel cannot help but recognize that “la nuance scotiste de ce passage ne peut guère être contestée” and added: “De même quand il affirme, dans le commentaire sur L’Exode, que Dieu est indépendant de toute loi, en ce sens qu’il est sa propre loi et la norme de toutes choses ou encore qu’il n’est permis à aucun mortel d’attaquer ou de reprendre le moindre commandement de Dieu non seulement parce que son gouvernement est au dessus de toutes le lois, mais parce que sa volonté est la norme la plus parfaite de toutes le lois.” See: *Calvin, Sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse*, (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1985), p. 93

⁹⁷ R. Seeberg, *Die Theologie des Johannes Duns Scotus* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1900), p. 163

⁹⁸ R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, III, p. 654, quoted by R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 137 to whom I owe the quotations.

⁹⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 363. See David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 40-52

¹⁰⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on Isaiah*, Vol. 8, p. 152

mention in the treatise on *The Secret Providence of God*.¹⁰¹ Yet it was mainly the Book of Job that elicited the strongest example of Calvin's perspective on this theme. Confronted with the inexplicable sufferings of the righteous Job and eager to dispel the suspicion that history was floating randomly, without the guidance of a just God, Calvin never tired of emphasizing the absolute mystery of God's power, which was understandable only by faith¹⁰² and not by reason.¹⁰³ He maintained the fact that the power of God could not be disclosed to the human mind didn't imply that it was "dereglee,"¹⁰⁴ as Job had suggested.

In Sermon 123, Calvin wrote:

Que quand nous pensons à la puissance de Dieu, il ne faut pas que nous lui attribuons une puissance tyrannique pour dire, O voila, Dieu fera de nous tout ce qu'il voudra, nous sommes ses creatures: il voit bien qu'il n'y a que fragilité en nous, et cependant il ne laisse pas de nous tourmenter sans propos. Quand

¹⁰¹ "That Sorbonic dogma, therefore, in the promulgation of which the Papal theologians so much pride themselves, "that the power of God is absolute and tyrannical," I utterly abhor. For it would be easier to force away the light of the sun from his heat, or his heat from his fire, than to separate the power of God from His justice. Away, then, with all such monstrous speculations from godly minds, as that God can possibly do more, or otherwise, than He has done, or that He can do anything without the highest order and reason. For I do not receive that other dogma, "that God, as being free from all law Himself, may do anything without being subject to any blame for doing so." For whosoever makes God without law, robs Him of the greatest part of His glory, because he spoils Him of His rectitude and justice. Not that God is, indeed, subject to any law, excepting in so far as He is a law unto Himself. But there is that inseparable connection and harmony between the power of God and His justice, that nothing can possibly be done by Him but what is moderate, legitimate, and according to the strictest rule of right. And most certainly, when the faithful speak of God as omnipotent, they acknowledge Him at the same time to be the Judge of the world, and always hold His power to be righteously tempered with equity and justice." Hoeksema, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 248

¹⁰² "Or maintenant (comme i'ay dit) il faut que nostre foi s'estende sur la puissance de Dieu: et puis que Dieu n'a point une puissance par certaine mesure, et qui soit enclose ni suiette à moyens humains, ne naturels, il faut aussi que nostre foy s'estende et haut et bas, qu'elle soit infinie." CO 34, 604

¹⁰³ In Sermon 109 he provocative asked: "Or quand nous voudrions comprendre ceste puissance et ceste vertu-la, ie vous prie, Je pourrions- nous enclorre à nostre cerveau? Il est impossible." CO 34, 603

¹⁰⁴ CO 34, 360

nous parlons ainsi, il n'y a point seulement de l'excez, mais ce sont des blasphemes execrables.¹⁰⁵

He didn't hesitate to call this point of view "un blaspheme execrable,"¹⁰⁶ "un blaspheme diabolique qui a esté forgé aux enfers,"¹⁰⁷ and "une chose detestable et diabolique."¹⁰⁸ Calvin took care to enumerate the reasons why God's omnipotence couldn't be tyrannical. Firstly, God's omnipotence, he wrote, cannot be disjointed from His will. For Calvin was unthinkable to state that God could do whatever is feasible. It is the divine will (and not external forces) which establishes what God can do.

Calvin held that, although God is *legibus solutus*, "He is law to himself and to all."¹⁰⁹

Nous en voyons beaucoup de phantastiques, Calvin wrote, que quand ils parlent de la puissance de Dieu, ils speculent ceci et cela, O si Dieu est tout puissant, pourquoy ne fait-il telle chose? si Dieu est tout-puissant, cela est possible. Voire, mais il ne nous faut pas ainsi extravaguer en nos imaginations: la puissance de Dieu ne s'adresse point à nos resveries, et n'y a rien de commun. Quoy donc? Ce sont choses inseparables, que la puissance de Dieu et sa volonté.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, whenever one speaks of God's will, what is taken into account is His revealed will rather than His hidden counsel. To avoid any misinterpretation

Calvin needed to relate God's omnipotence to His good will. He wrote:

¹⁰⁵ CO 35, 59

¹⁰⁶ CO 33, 362

¹⁰⁷ CO 34, 339-340

¹⁰⁸ CO 33, 540

¹⁰⁹ J. Hesselink, *Calvin's concept of the Law* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publication, 1992), p. 22

¹¹⁰ CO 35, 479

En cela voyons nous qu'il nous faut conioindre la puissance de Dieu avec sa bonne volonté: voire telle qu'il nous la declare par sa parole. Quand nous aurons cela, nous ne lascherons point la bride à beaucoup de speculations extravagantes: et aurons aussi de quoy repousser les mocqueries de ceux qui se voudroyent iouer de la vertu de Dieu comme d'une pelotte.¹¹¹

In discussing the features of God's omnipotence Calvin refused to hold the adjectives "infinite" and "absolute" as equivalent.

Il est vray, que les hommes cuideront avoir bonne cause de savoir faire des plaintes : et mesmes il y en a de si insensez, que quand ils auront desgorgé leurs blasphemes, ils penseront avoir obtenu la victoire, à l'encontre de Dieu: mais en la fin si faut-il qu'ils soyent condamnez quand Dieu voudra entrer en procez contre eux, et qu'il leur fera sentir sa vertu et sa puissance, non point une puissance tyrannique, comme ils l'ont imaginé: mais une puissance infinie, laquelle ne se monstre point à nostre sens pour dire, Dieu est-il iuste ou non selon que nous le comprenons tel?¹¹²

Secondly, God's omnipotence could not be separated from His justice, wisdom and goodness. In Sermon 123 he wrote:

Quand nous parlons de sa puissance, ou iustice, ou sagesse, ou bonté, nous parlons de lui-mesme: ce sont choses inseparables et qui ne se peuvent point discerner de son essence; c'est à dire pour en estre ostees. Car elles sont

¹¹¹ CO 35, 480

¹¹² CO 34, 428

tellement coniointes, que l'une ne peut estre sans l'autre. Dieu est-il puissant?

Aussi il est bon. Sa puissance ne desroge point à sa bonté, ni à sa iustice.¹¹³

Commenting upon the questions “Does God subvert judgment? Or does the Almighty pervert justice?” Calvin concluded firmly that God could do only that which is just and good:

Ici nous sommes admonestez d'attribuer à Dieu cest honneur, qu'il est la fontaine de toute equité et droiture, et qu'il est impossible qu'il face rien, qui ne soit bon et iuste. Car il ne nous faut point separer l'un d'avec l'autre: nous ne devons point imaginer qu'en Dieu il y ait des choses qui se puissent diviser l'une d'avec l'autre. Vray est qu'il nous faut bien distinguer entre la sagesse, et bonté, et iustice, et puissance de Dieu : mais tant y a que selon qu'il est Dieu, il faut que toutes ces choses soyent en luy, et qu'elles soyent comme de son essence.... Gardons nous bien donc d'irnaginer une puissance absolue en Dieu, comme s'il gouvernoit le monde ainsi qu'un tyran, qu'il usast d'excez ou de cruauté: mais sachons qu'en ayant tout sous sa main, ayant un pouvoir infini, faisant toutes choses: neantmoins il ne laisse point d'estre iuste. Or il est vray que ceste iustice de Dieu nous est cachée en partie, que nous ne lacomprenons pas: mais autant en est-il de sa puissance.¹¹⁴

Taking Job as an example, Calvin warned against the temptation to “enclore la puissance et iustice et sagesse de Dieu en l'estat present du monde tel comme il se peut apercevoir,”¹¹⁵ and from indulging in the fantasy “que Dieu ne gouverne point le

¹¹³ CO 35, 60. See also CO 33, 371, CO 33, 440, CO 34, 336, CO 34, 362, CO 35, 131, CO 35, 206. I owe these references to R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 115

¹¹⁴ CO 33, 371

¹¹⁵ CO 34, 480

monde quand il ne se monstre point Iuge.”¹¹⁶ If God’s power could not be separated from His justice, wisdom and will, it followed that the notions of justice and goodness depended exclusively upon God. In fact, if nothing in itself was good or evil, but it was the sovereign divine will that established the criteria of justice and goodness, then God was not bound by any external law.

Celuy qui veut assuiettir la volonté de Dieu à quelque raison, que fait il, sinon qu’il le despouille de sa gloire? Car la volonté de Dieu est la seule regle de toute raison, et la fontaine de toute iustice. Contentons-nous donc de cela, et ayons ceste modestie de dire, que Dieu ne veut rien qui ne soit iuste et equitable.¹¹⁷

Herein lies Calvin’s main concern to assert God’s righteousness. And yet his purpose in absolving God from every charge against him was not achieved. As a matter of fact, Calvin, having affirmed the goodness of God’s will, had to demonstrate concretely how belief in God’s justice could be maintained in the face of the suffering of the righteous.

4.4 Overview

The foregoing discussion has enabled us to highlight some important points. First the strong indebtedness of Calvin towards what Augustine termed as “Totus Noster.” Yet, in spite of the fact that Calvin quoted Augustine extensively, he tended to distance himself from the privative conception of evil held by his great master. Secondly, there

¹¹⁶ CO 34, 53

¹¹⁷ CO 34, 362: There is in this text the kernel of intuition that Calvin had to develop in the final edition of the *Institutes*, when he wrote: “Car la volonté de Dieu est tellement la reigle supreme et souveraine de iustice, que tout ce qu’il veut, il le faut tenir pour iuste, d’autant qu’il le veut) Pourtant quand on demande, Pourquoi est ce que Dieu a fait ainsi? Il faut respondre: Pource qu’il l’a voulu. Si on passe outre, en demandant, Pourquoi Pa-il voulu? c’est demander une chose plus grande et plus haute que la volonté de Dieu: ce qui ne se peut trouver.” CO 04, 488

is a strong emphasis on God's omnipotence. Yet, although Calvin seemed to echo the voluntarism of the 14th century, he vehemently denied the fiction of "absoluta potentia" which could work a-morally. The will of God was the law of all laws. He wrote: "What the Sorbonne doctors say, that God has an absolute power, is a diabolical blasphemy invented in hell."¹¹⁸ Thirdly, his constant concern was to uphold God's goodness. God was by definition right and good. To sum up, Calvin seemed to adhere to these three statements that he believed were essential for the Christian faith.

In the next chapter my analysis will focus on Calvin's attempt to defend God's justice by using the traditional arguments founded upon the revelation of God's will, as attested to by Holy Scriptures.

¹¹⁸ CO 34, 339-340: "Et de fait, quand ces docteurs Sorboniques disent, que Dieu a une puissance absoluë, c'est un blasphème diabolique qui a esté forgé aux enfers."

Chapter V

The “first line of defence” for God’s justice

Starting with the premise that God loves us and His intentions are good, Calvin carefully demonstrated that the suffering of believers, far from being gratuitous, was part of God’s plan. Susan Schreiner writes:

That was the price Calvin was willing to pay in order to remove humanity from an unpredictable universe. He did not fear evil in itself so much as an evil that was irrational, uncontrolled, and without purpose. Consequently, he thought it better for God to decree the evils that beset us than to make human beings the victim of a blind fortune or chance under the control of no divine power.¹

The concept that nothing, even suffering, was outside of God’s control was strenuously and continuously defended. In order to absolve God from charges of ultimate responsibility, having based everything on the assumption that God loves us, Calvin put forward two basic arguments:

- 1) God converts evil to good.
- 2) Evil and suffering have a purpose.

Let us examine the details of these two arguments.

¹ S. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1991), p. 35

5.1 God converts evil to good.

Calvin's argumentation was exquisitely juridical and was based on the principle that an act has no moral quality in itself, since its lawlessness depended entirely upon the governing purpose and intentions of agent. Whilst man was motivated by wrong impulses, God was always motivated by pure and holy ones. Building on this premise, Calvin believed the guilt for evil was to be ascribed entirely to the evil intentions of the agent. In the treatise *Against the fantastic and furious Sect of the Libertines*² Calvin had already emphasized this argument,³ which he further developed in Sermon 8. Taking inspiration from the text in which God permitted Satan to afflict Job for the second time,⁴ Calvin expressed the conviction

que le diable estant (comme il est) ennemi mortel de Dieu, toutefois rende obeissance a son createur, auquel il est subiet: non point qu'il le face de volonté, mais par force. Tant y a que le diable estant ainsi enrage, comme il est a nuire et ruiner tout le monde, quelque chose qu'il attente, ne qu'il puisse machiner, et pratiquer, ne peut rien accomplir sans la volonté de Dieu.⁵

But if God were the ultimate cause of Job's suffering, how could He be blameless? Fully aware of what was at stake, Calvin tried to meet the objections by

² J. Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, ed. Benjamin Farley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1982), pp. 161-326

³ "Il y a bien grande diversité entre l'oeuvre de Dieu, et celle d'un homme meschant, quand il s'en sert pour un instrument. Car le meschant est incité ou de son avarice, ou d'ambition, ou d'envie, ou de cruauté à faire ce qu'il fait, et ne regarde à autre fin. Pourtant selon la racine qui est l'affection du cuer, et le but où il pretend, l'oeuvre est qualifiée, et à bon droict est iugée mauvaise. Mais Dieu a un regard tout contraire. C'est d'exercer sa iustice pour le salut et conservation des bons, d'user de sa bonté et grace envers ses fideles, de chastier ceux qui l'ont mérité. Voila donc comme il faut discerner entre Dieu et les hommes, pour contempler en une mesme oeuvre sa iustice, sa bonté, son iugement: et de l'autre costé la malice tant du diable que des infideles." CO 07, 189. For further references see also CO 43, 502 and CO 48, 46

⁴ Job 2:7: "And the LORD said to Satan: "Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life."

⁵ CO 33, 104

inviting his listeners “à contenter de ce que l’Ecriture prononce.”⁶ Then he directed their attention to eschatological hope, exhorting them to wait patiently “que ce dernier iour soit venu, auquel nous ne cognoistrions plus en partie, ne comme en obscurité (ainsi que dit saint Paul 1. Cor. 13, 9. sv.) mais nous contemplerons face à face ce qui nous est maintenant monsté comme en un miroir.”⁷ Finally, Calvin presented the heart of his defence, namely the goodness of divine intention:

Or donc voici Dieu qui execute ainsi ses commandemens et ses decrets, voire: mais cependant notons que le mal ne luy peut pas estre imputé en façon que ce soit: Satan demeurera coupable en sa malice, les hommes sont redarguez et convaincus par leur conscience propre qui est leur iuge, et Dieu sera glorifié en tout ce qu’il fait. Et comment cela? Nous savons que toutes choses doivent estre estimées selon l’intention et la fin qu’auront les hommes. Or regardons maintenant comment c’est que Dieu conduit et gouverne ce qui se fait ici bas. Il est vray, comme nous avons desia veu, que Satan ne demande qu’à destruire, et à ruiner tout: mais Dieu de l’autre costé, a bien une autre fin. Car toutes ses oeuvres sont appelees iugemens, et l’Ecriture parlant ainsi, par ce seul mot nous veut oster toutes les mauvaises fantasies qui nous peuvent venir au devant, tellement que c’est une marque qui est pour iustifier toutes les oeuvres de Dieu, c’est assavoir, que ce sont iugemens et droitures. Or qu’il soit ainsi, voila Dieu qui punira ceux qui l’ont offensé: et qui est-ce qui pourra contester contre luy qu’il ne face bien? Apres il voudra exercer ses fideles à

⁶ CO 33, 105: “Nous ne comprenons point la grandeur et la hautesse des oeuvres de Dieu, sinon d’autant qu’il luy plaist nous en donner quelque goust, voire selon nostre mesure qui est bien petite.”

⁷ CO 33, 105

patience, il voudra mortifier leurs affections charnelles, il les voudra instruire à humilité: ces choses la peuvent elles estre condamnees de nous?⁸

In his *Sermons on Job*, the French Reformer had many occasions to reiterate the conviction “que Dieu ne laisse point de tellement disposer les choses que le mal nous est converti en bien, et que tout cela nous aidera à salut”⁹ and cited the example of the apostle Paul.¹⁰

In *The Institutes* Calvin, taking up again the example of Job, quoted a saying of Augustine¹¹ in his defence and enumerated other examples of situations where God had converted evil to good.¹² However, trust that God “convertira toutes nos afflictions en ioye, et en gloire”¹³ and “toutes nos miseres à bien et à salut, que ce

⁸ CO 33, 107-108. Calvin had given a further example of this argument in the *Institutes* (I. 17. 5) with the story of Joseph who was sold by his brothers into slavery: “Par la grandeur infinie de sa sapience, il se fait droitement aider de mauvais instrumens à bien faire.” CO 3, 255

⁹ CO 33, 225

¹⁰ For instance, the Apostle Paul: “Voilà Satan qui besongne en S. Paul, voire par la permission de Dieu. Et l’issue quelle est-elle? Il est vray que Satan cuidoit abismer S. Paul, que son intention estoit bien de le desbaucher, afin qu’il quittast le service de Dieu, et qu’estant fasche des troubles et miseres qu’il enduroit incessamment, il se retirast un peu de la Chrestienté : voilà que Satan pensoit. Mais quoy? Dieu regarde à une autre fin, c’est qu’il veut tenir en bride son serviteur, afin qu’il ne ne s’oublie point, qu’il ne s’esleve point par trop.” CO 33, 78. See also CO 33, 225, 254, 764; CO 34, 154 and 471.

¹¹ “Parquoy toutes gens craignans Dieu et modesties acquiesceront volontiers à ceste sentence de saint Augustin, c’est que l’homme veut quelque fois d’une bonne volonté ce que Dieu ne veut point: comme si le fils desire que son pere vive, lequel Dieu appelle à la mort. Et à l’opposite, que l’homme veut d’une mauvaise volonté ce que Dieu veut d’une bonne; comme si un mauvais garçon souhaite la mort de son pere, lequel mourra par la volonté de Dieu. Le premier veut ce que Dieu ne veut point, et le second ne veut sinon ce que Dieu veut: et neantmoins l’amour et reverence que porte à son pere celui qui desire sa vie, est plus conforme au bon plaisir de Dieu auquel il semble repugner, que n’est l’impiété de celui duquel le souhait tend à ce que Dieu veut faire. Telle importance il y a de considerer ce qui est decent à Dieu ou à l’homme, de vouloir: et à quelle fin se rapporte la volonté de chacun, pour estre approuvée ou reprouvée. Car ce que Dieu veut iustement, il l’accomplit par les mauvaises volontez des hommes. Ce sont les mots de saint Augustin.” CO 03, 276

¹² Hunter A Mitchell, commented: “The treachery of Judas was divinely instigated for the furtherance of the plan of salvation. Sarah’s quarrel with and casting out of Hagar was directed by a heavenly providence. That Abraham should have been commanded to humour his wife entirely in this matter is no doubt extraordinary, but proves that God employed the services of Sarah for confirming His own promises. Although it was the revenging of a woman’s quarrel, yet God did not the less make known His doctrine by her mouth as a type of the Church.(Comm. Gal. iv. 30.) In all such instances Calvin seeks to make it plain that the providences of God are always justified by the fact that He uses the wickedness He decrees for the accomplishment of ends that are perfectly righteous.” *The Teaching of Calvin: A Modern Interpretation* (Westwood, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1950), p. 138

¹³ CO 33, 358

nous seront autant d'aides pour nous avancer à la vie eternelle,"¹⁴ was in blatant contrast to the opposite and tragic reality, wherein it seemed that "Dieu persecute,"¹⁵ "reprime,"¹⁶ "tormente"¹⁷ and "afflige les siens."¹⁸ In this anguished situation the question arose spontaneously: "Pourquoi Dieu consume toute la chair, brise et casse, engloutit, occit l'homme?"¹⁹ The reassuring answer of Calvin sounded clear:

Pour le vivifier Et ainsi combien que son ire nous soit terrible, quand il nous visite en rigueur, et qu'il faille que nous experimentions les choses qui sont ici contenues: si est-ce qu'encores nous esclaire-il de ceste esperance de salut qui est le seul moyen pour nous mener à vie. Ainsi donc souffrons d'estre comme engloutis en tristesse, et d'estre là aux abysmes: puis qu'ainsi est que nostre Dieu nous laisse bonne esperance, et que nous voyons qu'il ne commence point aujourdhui par nous, mais qu'il a ainsi traitté les siens de tout temps.²⁰

Although it could sometimes seem that God was our enemy, Calvin maintained that Dieu, "il ne prend point plaisir à tormenter ses povres creatures,"²¹ or "pour faire empirer nostre condition."²² Perhaps the most concise example of Calvin's perspective is found in Sermon 65, where he wrote: "Mais si Dieu nous afflige, cognoissons qu'il nous chastie pour nos pechez: s'il nous espargne cognoissons qu'il nous veut attirer à lui par douceur."²³

¹⁴ CO 34, 471

¹⁵ CO 34, 119 and 182

¹⁶ CO 34, 43; CO 35, 76

¹⁷ CO 35, 494

¹⁸ CO 33, 83, 290; CO 34, 322

¹⁹ CO 35, 82

²⁰ CO 35, 82. The phrase Dieu "nous vivifie" recurs other times: CO 33, 109, 755; CO 34, 109 and CO 35, 116

²¹ CO 35, 83

²² CO 33, 397

²³ CO 34, 50

At other times, the cries of pain from the persecuted church “comment Dieu dissimule-il? Pourquoi est-ce qu’il permet que son Eglise soit ainsi tormentee? Et comment les violences sont-elles si grandes?”²⁴ seemingly received no answer, if not the urgent warning to refrain from blaspheming God. Nevertheless Calvin couldn’t ignore the fact that it was not always possible to recognize the transformation of evil into good. Is it not true that sometimes the righteous comes to a bad end? In Sermon 15, he tried to meet this objection by making a distinction between the terms to “perish” and to “be afflicted.” He wrote:

Car les afflictions ne seront point tousiours pour perdre les hommes, comme nous avons desia traité en partie. Mesmes les afflictions seront si grieves quelquefois qu’il semblera qu’elles soyent mortelles. Que faut-il? Que nous concluyons ce que nous avons monsté par ci devant, puis que Dieu s’attribue cest office de retirer du sepulchre, que nous ne doutions point quand nous aurons bien enduré, que nous ne soyons secourus de luy.²⁵

These considerations would have remained isolated if they had not been put into the widest eschatological context. It was especially in Sermon 22 that Calvin tackled this perspective. The text of Job 5, 19-26 represented the starting point of his reflections. His confidence in the visibility of divine justice reached its climax with the words: “He shall deliver you in six troubles; yes, in seven no evil shall touch you. In famine He shall redeem you from death, And in war from the power of the sword.” Calvin, having invited his audience to embrace this doctrine, couldn’t have helped but recognize its partial truth:

Il est vray que ceci n’est point perpetuel: car nous verrons quelquefois que Dieu souffre que les siens tombent en mort violente, qu’il les retire de ce

²⁴ CO 35, 139

²⁵ CO 33, 189

monde ici en fleur d'âge, voire en leur enfance. Nous voyons que Cain est venu iusques à une grande vieillesse, et Abel a esté ravi par le glaive.

Comment sera-ce donc que Dieu préservera ses fideles iusques à ce qu'ils soyent bien meuris, comme si on amassoit le bled au grenier? Or il nous faut noter en premier lieu que quand l'Escriture parle de ces benedictions temporelles, elle signifie ce qui advient communement, et non pas tousiours. Et au reste il nous faut faire comparaison d'un plus grand bien à un moindre. Quand Dieu permet que les siens soyent retirez de ce monde bien tost, c'est pour leur profit.²⁶

Notwithstanding, it was only at the end of Sermon 22 that the pastoral dimension of his preaching became particularly evident, as he stressed that God loved all those who had testified to their faith with martyrdom:

Ils ne laissent pas d'estre aimez et favorisez de luy quand il permet qu'ils tombent ainsi en une mort violente: comme ceux qui sont persecutez par les tyrans ont une mort plus precieuse beaucoup. Car ils presentent un sacrifice qui est plaisant à Dieu: et ce luy est une offrande de bonne odeur, quand il voit que sa parolle est seellée par le sang des martyrs.²⁷

This interpretative key found its highest expression in Sermon 30. The slaughter of Job's children made Calvin uncomfortable, until he recalled God's salvific intentions for them:

Nous savons que Dieu quelques fois par un moyen violent osterà de ce monde ici les premiers ceux qu'il a esleus et ordonnez à salut, et les traitera en telle façon que le chastiment qu'il leur envoie leur sera converti à salut. Ainsi il

²⁶ CO 33, 280

²⁷ CO 33, 281

faut que les corps perissent pour un temps, afin que leurs ames soyent sauvées
 eternellement.²⁸

God loved all those whom He had afflicted. “Dieu en nous affligeant ne laisse pas de nous aimer: voire, et qu’il procurera nostre salut, de quelque rigueur qu’il use envers nous: que toutes nos afflictions seront adoucies par sa grace, et qu’il y donnera une issue desirable.”²⁹ This reassurance reoccurred innumerable times and with differing overtones in many sermons: “Dieu besongne envers les siens d’une telle façon, le tout leur sera tourné à salut, ils feront leur profit et avantage de ce qui sembloit tendre à leur perdition.”³⁰ “Dieu nous aime tendrement,”³¹ “et declare qu’il est nostre Pere que nous ne pouvons tomber que sur nos pieds.”³² “Il est nous propise,”³³ and “nous favorise,”³⁴ “que nous puissions avoir nostre refuge à luy.”³⁵ In the light of this “amour”³⁶ and “douceur paternal,”³⁷ Calvin stated his conviction that “God nous chastiera doucement, et d’une façon temperée, et que iamais sa misericorde ne sera eslongnee de nous, comme aussi il le dit en l’autre passage en son Prophete Abacuc (3, 2).”³⁸

In Sermon 22, having in mind the suffering of the persecuted church, he wrote:
 Dieu nous delivrera de famine en temps de sterilité, qu’il nous delivrera de
 glaive en temps de guerre, qu’il nous gardera des bestes sauvages, comme s’il
 estoit dit, Que les hommes ne seront point seulement assaillis de famine, ou les

²⁸ CO 33, 376

²⁹ CO 33, 374

³⁰ CO 33, 399

³¹ CO 33, 74

³² CO 33, 226

³³ CO 33, 519

³⁴ CO 34, 50

³⁵ CO 35, 103

³⁶ CO 33, 515

³⁷ CO 33, 337; CO 34, 322, 620; CO 35, 395 and 492

³⁸ CO 34, 111

autres de guerre, ou les autres de peste, ou les autres molestez de bestes sauvages, mais que les uns et les autres sentiront qu'ils peuvent avoir autant de nuisances, comme nous voyons qu'il y a de moyens pour nous fascher: que ce nous sont autant d'ennemis qui nous sont prochains: et que si nostre Dieu n'avoit tousiours sa main estendue, s'il n'avoit pitié de nous pour nous delivrer, voila cent mille morts qui nous menacent, et environnent de tous costez.³⁹

The love of God embraced "aussi nos enfants."⁴⁰ Calvin's positive attitude toward suffering found expression whenever he used the euphemism "Dieu nous visite,"⁴¹ signifying that the chastisement of God is always linked to His paternal love, as he wrote in Sermon 35: "Il est vray que Die visite les siens, lesquels il aime: mais c'est d'une façon paternelle, il modere tousiours sa rudesse."⁴²

Because of his belief in God's love for His elect, Calvin was able to look at suffering with an accepting attitude and to consider "les afflictions douces et amiables,"⁴³ "quand nous pourrons aller ainsi à Dieu,"⁴⁴ "or quand nous cognoissons qu'elles tendent à nostre salut."⁴⁵ In Sermon 20 he wrote:

Nous sommes sous sa protection, et que nous sommes cachez sous ses ailes, tellement qu'il ne permet point aux meschans d'executer leur rage sur nous, comme ils le voudroyent bien, et comme ils sont prests de le faire, si ce

³⁹ CO 33, 275-276

⁴⁰ CO 34, 249

⁴¹ For instance: CO 33, 169; 220; 272; 338; 365 and 378

⁴² CO 33, 437

⁴³ CO 33, 341

⁴⁴ CO 33, 341

⁴⁵ CO 33, 478

n'estoit qu'ils fussent empeschez d'en haut. Voila donc ce que nous avons à noter.⁴⁶

In the midst of suffering, believers were to keep alive their trust in God and not fall into the temptation which Satan would have them believe, namely, that God has left them alone. Satan tried to convince them that the eye of God is not upon them. This was the reason why Calvin repeatedly portrayed Job's friends as driving Job to despair with their interpretations of the retributive character of suffering. Instead of employing passive resignation, Calvin preferred to believe that the inexplicable and tragic events of human life were meaningful, in accordance with God's will.

Whilst Martin Luther was obsessed with sin, Calvin was haunted by a fear of the apparently haphazard and meaningless course of existence. Deeply convinced that it "est impossible que Dieu favorise au conseil des meschans,"⁴⁷ he tried to mitigate the sometimes harsh reality of his time and to render suffering bearable. In summing up the questions with which Calvin struggled, Theodore Minnema wrote: "Calvin in his experience of affliction fought off one of its gravest temptations, the response of nihilism or meaninglessness. Suffering, in order to be usefully faced, must be meaningfully interpreted."⁴⁸ In spite of his many diseases,⁴⁹ the French Reformer

⁴⁶ CO 33, 256

⁴⁷ CO 33, 477

⁴⁸ T. Minnema, "Calvin's interpretations of human suffering" in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David E. Holverda (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 141

⁴⁹ In a letter written in 1564 to H. Bullinger Calvin gave a short report of his various diseases: "For though the pain in my side is abated, my lungs are nevertheless so charged with phlegmatic humors that my respiration is difficult and interrupted. A calculus in my bladder also gives me very exquisite pain for the last twelve days. Add to that the anxious doubts we entertain about the possibility of curing it, for all remedies have hitherto proved ineffectual; exercise on horseback would have been the best and most expeditious method of getting rid of it, but an ulcer in my abdomen gives me excruciating pain even when seated or lying in bed, so that the agitation of riding is out of the question. Within the last three days the gout has also been troublesome. You will not be surprised then if so many united sufferings make me lazy." *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) VII, p. 362. CO 20, 282-283

maintained that God tenderly cared for him and he tried to infuse all those who suffered with this conviction.

Given this perspective, it is evident that the answers proposed by Calvin as to why people suffered, were not so much theoretical arguments, but rather practical suggestions for making God's actions comprehensible and acceptable to the faithful. Herein lies one of the most important features of his theology. Whereas Thomas Aquinas, when asked whether theology were a theoretical or practical science, answered that it was both,⁵⁰ but emphasised the first feature, Calvin held the opposite to be true and showed little interest in abstract questions. His main goal was the edification of the Christian community and therefore he paid little attention to those issues which were not aimed at achieving this goal.

This pragmatic goal found its highest expression in Sermon 95. After having stressed that “celuy qui a la charge et office d'enseigner, doit bien regarder quels sont les auditeurs ausquels il parle,”⁵¹ he further illustrated his opinion with three amusing examples:

C'est comme si on venoit à un medecin, et qu'on luy demandast remede pour une maladie:et s'il alloit traitter de son art en general, et qu'il en disputast, et le povre malade rendroit l'esprit cependant, là où il eust peu estre restauré si on y pust remedié soudain: et tous ces propos dequoyauront-ils servi? Quand on viendra à un masson pour luy bailler quelque bastiment en main, et s'il dispute de bastir des chasteaux, et qu'il propose de dresser de grans bastimens en l'air, et qu'il dispute comment il fera, et cependant qu'il ne regarde point à l'oeuvre presente: et que sera-ce? Si on vient à un advocat pour demander conseil de quelque procez, et qu'il aille disputer des loix en general, et qu'il ne reduise

⁵⁰ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 1, art. 1

⁵¹ CO 34, 419

point les choses à la cause presente: autant en sera-il. Ainsi donc notons bien que quand nous traittons la parole de Dieu, il faut que nous ayons un certain but, pour ne point vaguer çà et là: mais que nous tranchions droit, sachans à quelle fin nous parlons, afin que nos propos ne soient point extravagans, qu'ils ne s'esgarent point çà et là: car autrement nous pourrions bien dire beaucoup de bonnes choses: mais tout ce bien-la dequoy servira-il?⁵²

Repeatedly, he invited his listeners to “appliquer la doctrine à nostre usage.”⁵³ In Sermon 66 he wrote:

Par cela nous sommes admonnestez, que pour estre bien instruits en l'escole de Dieu, et pour acquerir une vraye prudence qui nous soit utile à nostre salut: il nous faut appliquer nostre estude à considerer les iugemens de Dieu en ce monde, tant sur nous, que sur nos prochains, et que nous soyons là et soir et matin. Car quand chacun mettra peine de s'y exercer, voila un temps bien employé. Et pourquoi? Car c'est le principal de la doctrine laquelle Dieu nous apporte, que nous appliquions ses iugemens à nostre usage, et que nous en soyons edifiez en sa crainte.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, although the experiences of the persecuted church of his time, as well as the situation in Geneva, may have influenced his *Sermons on Job*, Calvin only occasionally made references to them.⁵⁵

⁵² CO 34, 423-424

⁵³ There are 56 references to this statement: CO 33, 122, 140, 159, 182, 223, 226, 242, 266, 302, 322, 334, 338, 385, 388, 399, 440, 478, 524, 560, 571, 577, 591, 602, 640, 646, 672, 706; CO 34, 6, 16, 60, 64, 262, 324, 345, 357, 416, 434, 480, 715; CO 35, 31, 72, 87, 108, 146, 266, 284, 314, 331, 332, 342, 392, 402, 420, 504.

⁵⁴ CO 34, 60

⁵⁵ T. Dekker, following the research of William Naphy, *Calvin and the consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), has highlighted some of these “rare remarks”. He wrote: “Preaching in September 1554 on Job 23, Calvin refers to how honest men can barely walk the streets without being shouted at and abused. (CO 34, 377) Preaching the following month on Job 29, Calvin speaks of those in authority as filled with pride. (CO 34, 563) The promotion of Calvin’s opponents in the elections of 1553 and 1554 brought forth from Calvin a charge

Why? Susan Schreiner has suggested that:

One of the reasons Calvin did not more explicitly recount the ‘tragic moment of the Reformation had to do with the exegetical principle he applied to the Joban text. Expounding only the literal sense, Calvin did not practice typology and therefore did not make Job a prophet of Christ or a type of the suffering, martyred, or exiled church.⁵⁶

These considerations are not convincing. The fact that Calvin rarely made allusions to the events of his day is far from being significant, inasmuch as it represents the common denominator of quite all of his works. In fact Calvin was an extremely reserved man and unwilling to make any reference to his problems, as he had once written to Cardinal Sadoletus.⁵⁷

However, even independently of his personal attitude, it is noteworthy that Calvin was reluctant to interpret the book of *Job* only in light of the tragic events of his time. Job was, for him, not only the personification of the persecuted church, but also of all those who, in very different contexts of time and place, had suffered unjustly and without reason. The emphasis upon the supratemporal dimension of Job’s experiences ensured the success of these sermons, which were read by men of all generations who recognized themselves either in Job or in Calvin. Fritz Büsser summed up the impression he had upon reading Calvin’s *Sermons on Job*:

La grande, la profonde raison de la faveur dans les Sermons sur Job ont joui dans le monde chrétien, c’est l’intensité de la piété ... Dieu toujours Dieu, ne

that they were ‘rascals’ and ‘nothing at all.’ (CO 34, 161) In an otherwise rare moment, Calvin refers in three consecutive Sermons to a particular incident that he had witnessed in which a ‘strumpet’ had been imprisoned, only to be given ‘great Tartes’ by way of a seeming reward. ‘What a dealing is that?’ Calvin asks? (CO 34,143)” in *Calvin’s Teaching on Job*, p. 32

⁵⁶ S. Schreiner, *Where shall Wisdom be found? Calvin’s exegesis of Job from medieval and modern perspectives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 7

⁵⁷ “De me non libenter loquor. Quoniam tamen prorsus silere non pateris, dicam, quod salva modestia potero.” CO 05, 389

voir que Lui, Sa puissance, Sa justice, Sa miséricorde, s’abaisser, s’aneantir en Sa presence, ne vivre que de Lui et par Lui et pout Lui, c’est la note dominante, exclusive des ces discours; cette piété intense est le secret de leur vertu.⁵⁸

5.2 Suffering has a purpose

If God’s intentions are good and He loves us, then, Calvin argued, suffering can be not only helpful, but also meaningful. Following this line of reasoning he took care to enumerate the reasons by which an Omnipotent and just God could cause affliction.

5.2.1 Suffering as judgement

The first argument that Calvin took into account was the so-called retributive thesis, according to which, evil and suffering were willed by God as the result of a just judgement that He exercised over humanity. At the centre of this line of argumentation lay the conviction that human beings were corrupted by original sin.

Calvin imagined that the pre-fallen world was a paradise where all creatures had assigned places and lived in full conformity with God’s will. Adam’s condition was particularly fortunate. Created in the image of God “pour avoir intelligence de tout ce qui luy appartenait, tellement qu’il ne pouvoit rien souhaiter,”⁵⁹ he was “comme sont les Anges de paradis”⁶⁰ and in full control of the entire creation.⁶¹ Unfortunately, the unjustified act of disobedience on the part of Adam and Eve was a violation of God’s order which had great and awful repercussions, and deeply affected the entire universe. Whilst originally the world was created to be at the service of

⁵⁸ F. Büsser, *Calvins Urteil über sich selbst* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1950), p. 84

⁵⁹ CO 34, 515

⁶⁰ CO 34, 356

⁶¹ CO 35, 420

humans, it now rebelled against them. The abyss between the original state of grace and the present awful situation was depicted in Sermon 41:

Il faut en premier lieu que nous cognoissions à quelle fin nous naissons, voire selon que nous sommes pecheurs en Adam.... Cognoissons donques que combien que nous naissons en ce monde, combien que nous soyons creatures de Dieu, tant nobles, tant excellentes que rien plus: toutesfois par le peché la mort a comme aneanti et renversé ceste noblesse qui estoit en nous, tellement que nous desplaisons à Dieu, qu'il nous deia voue comme si nous n'estions point formez de sa main, d'autant que nous sommes desfigurez, et que le diable a mis et imprimé ses marques en nous: et au reste qu'estans subiets â- la malediction qui a esté prononcee sur Adam, nous sommes comme bannis de tout le monde, qu'il n'y a ne ciel ne terre qui ne nous tiene comme detestables.⁶²

Innumerable times⁶³ Calvin emphasized that men, because of original sin, were nothing but sinners from birth and, consequently, their natural gifts were completely corrupted and their supernatural gifts had been stripped from them. Employing differing accents and various expressions, Calvin never tired of insisting that before God “nous sommes maudits,”⁶⁴ “perdus,”⁶⁵ “damnez,”⁶⁶ “lourds,”⁶⁷ “tellement pervertis, que la marque que Dieu avoit mise en nous pour y estre glorifié, est tournee en son opprobre,”⁶⁸ “tellement corrompus en Adam, que nous sommes ici

⁶² CO 33, 515

⁶³ The phrase “Dieu nous afflige” or other equivalent recur innumerable times in Sermons on Job.

⁶⁴ CO 33, 247

⁶⁵ CO 33, 249

⁶⁶ CO 33, 527

⁶⁷ CO 34, 297

⁶⁸ CO 35, 47-48

tousiours comme tenus captifs de Satan, que nous ne cessons de mal-faire,”⁶⁹ “pleins de pollutions, maudits et reiettez de Dieu,”⁷⁰ “pleins de pechez et de corruptions,”⁷¹ “povres malfaiteurs aians la corde au col,”⁷² “gouffres insatiables,”⁷³ “povres et miserables creatures,”⁷⁴ “pollus et detestables,”⁷⁵ “abominables, puants, infects, et inutiles,”⁷⁶ “vendus sous peché.”⁷⁷

With this negative analysis Calvin painted a frightful picture of human situation. “Nostre nature est plus que vicieuse et perverse,”⁷⁸ “nous sommes sortis d’une masse corrompe et mauvaise,”⁷⁹ “le peche est en la nature des homes,”⁸⁰ “il n’y a en toute nostre sagesse qu’une pure folie, il n’y a en toutes nos vertus que mensonge et iniquité,”⁸¹ “nostre condition est vile et abiecte,”⁸² “vuides de tout bien, nous ne tendons qu’à mal.”⁸³ As a consequence, the conviction that God “ne trouvera point un seul homme au monde qui soit iuste,”⁸⁴ enabled the French Reformer to ascribe the cause of suffering to the sinful life of men, as he pointed out in Sermon 19:

Car quand nous sommes faschez de quelque mal, nous regardons çà et là, et faisons nos discours, afin de trouver la cause hors de nous: cependant nous ne cognoissons point que Dieu nous afflige à cause de nos pechez, et que la

⁶⁹ CO 33, 512

⁷⁰ CO 33, 657

⁷¹ CO 33, 202

⁷² CO 33, 290

⁷³ CO 33, 695

⁷⁴ CO 33, 338.

⁷⁵ CO 34, 670

⁷⁶ CO 33, 729

⁷⁷ CO 33, 730

⁷⁸ CO 35, 57

⁷⁹ CO 33, 657

⁸⁰ CO 33, 60

⁸¹ CO 33, 346-347

⁸² CO 33, 341

⁸³ CO 33, 711

⁸⁴ CO 33, 456

source de toutes les adversitez, et des maux que nous endurons ici bas, doit estre cerchee en nostre vie.⁸⁵

God had a right to punish humanity much the way the judge condemned the criminal to death: “Quand un criminel sera puni, on ne dira pas qu’on lui face tort, ne qu’il y ait cruauté au iuge. On dira doncque ceux qui sont constituez en l’estat de iustice, s’acquient de leur devoir.”⁸⁶

Every event in human history was morally understandable and rationally justifiable, since it was a direct consequence of a visible and knowable divine justice. Sometimes God anticipated His judgement and punished sinners not only in their life times,⁸⁷ but also their children. He wrote:

Il est vray que nous trouverions cecy estrange à nostre sens: mais ii a desia esté déclaré cy dessus, comme Dieu peut punir les enfans des meschans sans leur faire tort. Et pourquoy? Nous sommes tous maudits en Adam, et n'apportons que condamnation avec nous du ventre de la mere. Si donc Dieu nous laisse tels que nous sommes, desia nous sommes destinez à perdition et grans et petis.⁸⁸

Human history turned out to be the theatre in which the retributive justice of God becomes discernible. S. Schreiner recognized this element. She wrote:

Calvin knows that in the moral word of Job’s friends, divine justice is

⁸⁵ CO 33, 233

⁸⁶ CO 34, 119

⁸⁷ CO 34, 302: “Ici derechef Eliphaz confirme le propos qu’il avoit tenu par ci devant, c’est assavoir quede toute ancienneté on a cognu que les meschans ont esté punis. Or il est vrai que Dieu (comme nous avons déclaré) a tousiours donné quelques exemples de ses iugemens, afin que les hommes fussent tenus en crainte: suivant ce qui est dit au Prophete Isaie (26, 9), Le Seigneur fera ses iugemens, et les habitans de la terre apprendront que c’est de iustice. Ainsi, quand nous voyons que nostre Seigneur estend son bras, qu’il chastie les meschans, et qu’il se monstre leur Iuge: voila qui nous doit inciter à le craindre et l’aimer. Dieu donc a bien donné de tout temps quelques signes, qu’il falloit que les hommes vinsent à conte devant lui, et que les iniquitez ne demeureroient pas impunies: mais cependant Dieu n’a pas egalement puni ceux qui l’avoient offensé.”

⁸⁸ CO 34, 484

knowable and visible. According to their retributive theology of suffering, God's actions are rational, history is predictable, and God always rewards and punishes according to the Law.... The Reformer reminds his audience that there are times in history when God does act as Job's friends argued, by restoring order and punishing the wicked; in such ages one can see divine justice at work in the earthly realm.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, Calvin was fully aware that the thesis of retributive suffering wouldn't give a satisfactory answer to innocent suffering and to the question why as to why "la condition des fideles est plus miserable que celle des contempteurs de Dieu."⁹⁰ In this situation, the penitential nature of suffering espoused by Job's friends, although true in itself,⁹¹ could hardly be defended, since there were periods in history when divine justice was not visible.

Evidence of this acknowledgment, can be found right at the beginning of his *Sermons on Job*:

Job cognoist que Dieu n'afflige pas tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez: mais qu'il a ses iugemens secrets, desquels il ne nous rend pas conte, et cependant qu'il faut que nous attendions iusques à ce qu'il nous revele pourquoy il fait ceci, ou cela.⁹²

⁸⁹ Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be found?*, p. 43. Besides the texts quoted by Schreiner (CO 33, 109, 383-88; CO 34, 305-6, 483, see Sermon 78 in CO 34, 145-146: "Car nous voyons comme il a exercé vengeance sur tous ceux qui s'estoyent adonnez à cruauté, à rapines, et autres extorsions: apres, comme il a puni les paillardises, et autres infections quand elles ont par trop regné: nous voyons puis apres comme il a puni les pariures, les cruauté, qu'il n'a peu porter l'orgueil des hommes. Ne faut-il point quand nous regarderons à cela, qu'il nous serve aussi bien auioird'huy? Retenons bien donc ceste leçon qui nous est ici monstree, c'est à savoir, puis que Dieu dés la creation du monde n'a cessé de tousiours nous donner quelques advertissemens pour monstrier qu'il est Iuge du monde, que nous apprenions de le craindre, et de cheminer en sollicitude, et que les punitions qu'il a faites sur les meschans nous soyent autant de miroirs, et autant de brides pour nous retenir."

⁹⁰ CO 35, 492

⁹¹ CO 33, 23-24; CO 35, 1

⁹² CO 33, 23

Herein lies one of the most important elements which left its mark on the interpretation of Job's history: Calvin was compelled to acknowledge that there was not a direct cause and effect relationship between suffering and sin: that is, Job was not punished because of his sins.⁹³

In Sermon 67 he wrote: "il ne nous en faut point faire une regle generale que les punitions que Dieu envoie sur les meschans s'accomplissent, et apparussent tellement, qu'on cognoit finalement à veuë d'oeil en ceste vie presente que Dieu est leur Iuge."⁹⁴ The harsh reality of everyday life shows "que les hommes crient de la cité, et les ames de ceux qu'on tormenté et qu'on oppresse se lamentent, et Dieu n'empesche pas que tout cela ne s'execute: c'est à dire, il laisse aller les choses en desordre."⁹⁵ As a matter of fact "Dieu espargne aucunesfois les meschans et les supporte, aucunesfois il chastie ceux qu'il aime, et les traite en plus grande rigueur beaucoup, que ceux qui sont du tout incorrigibles."⁹⁶ There were moments in which "Dieu procede envers nous d'une façon sauvage, et en laquelle nous n'appercevions ny equité ny droiture,"⁹⁷ whilst afflicting, tormenting and persecuting the righteous. Sometimes it seemed "que Dieu s'adioigne du costé des meschans, et qu'il ait fait complot avec eux pour leur donner tant plus d'audace."⁹⁸ Echoing Job's words "comment donc est-ce que Dieu procede contre moy avec une telle violence?" Calvin went so far as to question the justice of God.⁹⁹ In Sermon 35 he asked: "Car que Dieu sans cause tourmente ainsi les hommes, n'est-ce pas simple iniustice, ou une cruauté telle, qu'on ne trouvera point qu'il soit plus Iuge du monde, mais plustost un

⁹³ CO 33, 96. "Iob n'est point puni à cause de ses pechez." (Compare CO 35, 531)

⁹⁴ CO 34, 64-65

⁹⁵ CO 34, 383

⁹⁶ CO 33, 406

⁹⁷ CO 33, 445

⁹⁸ CO 33, 477

⁹⁹ CO 33, 353

tyran?”¹⁰⁰ The happiness of the wicked might have caused believers to succumb to the satanic temptation to think “que Dieu nous est ennemy mortel, et qu’il ne faut plus que nous ayons recours à luy, ains que nous sachions que iamais il ne nous doit faire merci.”¹⁰¹

Despite this seemingly insurmountable contradiction between a just God and the apparent triumph of the wicked, Calvin proposed, as Richard Stauffer pointed out, another explanation of “mysterium iniquitatis:” “God would allow the existence and manifestation of evil so that evildoers can condemn themselves to a deserved death by their actions.”¹⁰² The reason why the wicked were destined to a final death was supported by an idea of the eternal predestination of God. In Sermon 67 Calvin expressed this conviction with crude realism:

Dieu cognoit le temps, et la saison qu’il doit exterminer les meschans: quelquesfois il les engraisse comme on fera un boeuf ou un porceau, ainsi qu’il en est parlé au Prophete (Iere. 12, 3). Or si on engraisse un boeuf ou un porceau, ce ne sera pas pour les faire travailler quand ils seront bien saouls, ce ne sera pas pour les envoyer au froid et au chaud, ne qu’ils endurent la peine comme les autres bestes: mais ce sera iusqu’à ce qu’on assommé le boeuf, et qu’on coupe la gorge au porceau. Ainsi donc en est-il, que Dieu engraissera les meschans, iusques à, ce qu’ils soyent venus au poinct du sepulchro. Et pourtant notons bien ce que i’ay desia touché, c’est assavoir, que pour nous appuyer sur les iugemens de Dieu, il nous faut passer outre le monde, il nous faut contempler les choses qui sont encores cachees devant nos yeux.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ CO 33, 437

¹⁰¹ CO 33, 23

¹⁰² R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 278

¹⁰³ CO 34, 72

In Sermon 98 Calvin developed this argument more fully by pointing out that sometimes

Nostre Seigneur donc traite les meschans en ce monde comme des boeufs ou des porceaux, il les engraisse, il les soule, il les crevé du tout: mais c'est à leur perdition, d'autant qu'ils abusent de sa bonté et patience: ils ne font qu'amasser ce thresor d'ire dont parle S. Paul (Rom. 2, 5), cependant que Dieu leur est ainsi benin, et qu'ils polluent toutes les graces qu'ils reçoivent de sa main.¹⁰⁴

With the illusory successfulness of the wicked one ought not to lose sight of the fact that the wrath of God hung over their heads. They seemed to be like “des povres condamnez qui n'attendent sinon l'heure du supplice et du torment: mais desia ils sont asseurez de leur condamnation.”¹⁰⁵

He insisted upon the transience of suffering and the inconsequentiality of evil innumerable times: “Dieu quelquefois permettra bien que les meschans soyent eslevez, et qu'ils fleurissent: mais cela n'est point de longue duree.”¹⁰⁶ “Les afflictions sont temporelles pour les enfans de Dieu: et puis elles leur servent de medecines, et l'issue en est tousiours heureuse.”¹⁰⁷ Although it is impossible for us to understand “pourquoy il y a tant de mal en ce monde, il faut tousiours venir à Dieu.”¹⁰⁸ Calvin's main response to suffering always remained the same: one had to continue to trust in God. Again and again he emphasized that all the evil that humans experienced should even move them closer to God. This idea that trust in God was the

¹⁰⁴ CO 34, 464

¹⁰⁵ CO 33, 160

¹⁰⁶ CO 34, 146

¹⁰⁷ CO 35, 509

¹⁰⁸ CO 33, 450

one and only appropriate answer to suffering was connected to the notion of the fatherhood of God, and his care and love.¹⁰⁹

5.2.2 Suffering as a test

According to this point of view, the chastisement of Job was intended to “esprouver Iob,”¹¹⁰ and in particular to test his “patience and obedience,”¹¹¹ rather than to scourge him for past sins:

Nous sachons, que Dieu n'afflige iamais les siens qu'il n'ait iuste raison, voire combien qu'il n'ait point esgard à leurs pechez comme Iob, il est certain qu'il est affligé non point comme un meschant. Il est vray que Dieu avoit iuste occasion de le punir encores cent fois plus: mais si est-ce que Dieu n'a point eu ce regard ni ceste intention. Quoy donc? Il a voulu esprouver sa patience: il a vouü oster ceste calomnie de Satan qui disoit, Iob obéit à Dieu, pource qu'il est en prosperité: Dieu donc a voulu monstrier le contraire.¹¹²

In Sermon 136, Calvin, having stated that “quand Dieu a lasché la bride à Satan car ce n'a pas esté que Iob se fust desbauché, et qu'il eust provoqué l'ire de Dieu par de grans crimes,” recognized that God “vouloit esprouver son obeissance, afin qu'il nous servist de miroir.”¹¹³ In Sermon 64 the French Reformer pointed out

¹⁰⁹ CO 33, 662: “Si donc nous ne voulons tomber en desespoir, regardons à ce qui nous peut adoucir toutes nos angoisses. Pour exemple: en premier lieu, combien que nostre vie soit miserable, si est-ce neantmoins que Dieu nous y fait gouter sa bouté en tant de sortes, que nous pouvons conclure que nous sommes bien-heureux, d'autant qu'il nous fait participans de ses benefices. Nostre vie est brevfe: mais elle n'est pas si brevfe, que Dieu ne nous donne le loisir de cognoistre qu'il est nostre Pere et Sauveur, et de gouter quelle est sa vertu en nous, et qu'il nous appelle à soy. Quand nous n'aurions ce bien-la que pour un quart d'heure, et que la iouissance n'en dureroit point plus: ie vous prie, ne devons-nous pas priser un tel bien?”

¹¹⁰ CO 33, 341

¹¹¹ CO 33, 647; CO 34, 24, 107; CO 35, 2 and 54

¹¹² CO 33, 501

¹¹³ CO 35, 209

another purpose for suffering, that one was to be an example for all the other believers:

Ceci est advenu à Iob, afin qu'il nous fust en exemple. Ainsi donc quand il plaira à Dieu de nous affliger, si le monde iuge mai de nous, et que plusieurs prennent occasion de nous condamner, comme si iamais nous n'avions eu affection droite: prenons le tout en patience, sachans que c'est une partie de nostre croix, quand nostre Seigneur suscite ainsi les hommes, et que Satan machine de nous ruiner; mais qu'il faut que nous remedions à un tel mal, comme Iob nous le declare.¹¹⁴

Convinced that Job's experience should be regarded as paradigmatic of the apparent tragedy of human life trapped within a disordered history, Calvin expressed the conviction that God would use suffering in order to "esprouver nostre foy et notre obeissance,"¹¹⁵ "nostre constance,"¹¹⁶ "nostre patience,"¹¹⁷ "nostre charité,"¹¹⁸ "nostre fermeté,"¹¹⁹ "nostre esperance,"¹²⁰ "l'amour que nous luy portons,"¹²¹ "nostre modestie,"¹²² "nostre humanité,"¹²³ "nostre humilité."¹²⁴ Suffering tests piety, reveals the feebleness of flesh, and prompted the believer to suffer for the sake of righteousness. Through suffering, believers were roused to hope, trained in patience, instructed in obedience, and had their pride chastened.

¹¹⁴ CO 34, 34

¹¹⁵ CO 33, 68

¹¹⁶ CO 33, 89

¹¹⁷ CO 33, 273, 493; CO 34, 594, 646; CO 35, 10

¹¹⁸ CO 34, 288

¹¹⁹ CO 34, 292

¹²⁰ CO 34, 314

¹²¹ CO 34, 559

¹²² CO 34, 658

¹²³ CO 34, 699

¹²⁴ CO 34, 585

5.2.3. Suffering as medicine

Calvin also singled out a curative function for suffering when he used the expressions:

“pour notre profit,”¹²⁵ “pour notre bien et pour notre salut.”¹²⁶ According to this perspective “quand Dieu permet à Satan de tenter ses fideles, c’est pour leur faire servir le tout comme de médecine,”¹²⁷ “pour les purger de cest orgueil et presumption, de laquelle autrement ils ne pourroyent pas se retirer,”¹²⁸ “pour nous ramener au chemin de salut.”¹²⁹ God would use the afflictions “comme de medicines preservatives, n’attendant pas que la maladie ait gagné par trop.”¹³⁰ In Sermon 21 Calvin highlighted this idea:

Mais i’ai desia montré que les playes que Dieu fait, nous sont autant de medecines. Il y a donc double grace qui nous est ici montrée : l’une est d’autant que Dieu quand il nous afflige procure nostre bien, qu’il nous attire à repentance, il nous purge de nos pechez, et mesmes de ceux qui nous sont incognus. Car Dieu ne se contente pas de remedier aux maux lesquels sont desia presens, mais il regarde qu’il y a beaucoup de semence de maladies cachées en nous. Il anticipe donc, il y met ordre, c’est un bien singulier qu’il nous fait que quand il semble qu’il viene contre nous l’espée desgainée qu’il nous monstre signe de courroux: toutesfois quoi qu’il en soit il se declare medecin. Voila pour un item. Et puis il y a la seconde grace qui nous est aussi bien montrée, c’est assavoir, que Dieu lie les playesqu’il a faites, et y donne guerison. Et c’est ce que i’ai desia allegué de S. Paul (1. Cor. 10, 13), qu’il ne

¹²⁵ CO 33, 263

¹²⁶ CO 33, 165

¹²⁷ CO 33, 78, CO 33, 480, CO 35, 198, CO 35, 221, CO 35, 395

¹²⁸ CO 33, 245

¹²⁹ CO 34, 292

¹³⁰ CO 33, 264, CO 35, 447

permet point que nous soyons tentez outre nostre portée, mais qu'il donne
bonne issue à tous nos maux.¹³¹

Even admitting that “cette medecine est rude,”¹³² he recognized it was “good”¹³³ and necessary, “attendu que nos maladies sont si enracinées en nous”¹³⁴ and “veu que nous sommes tant estourdis à suivre les appetis de nostre chair.”¹³⁵ If God didn’t punish men, he warned, they would be lost:

Dieu ne peut souffrir que nous allions ainsi en decadence, et s’il nous laissoit ainsi à l’abandon sans aucun chastiment, ce seroit nostre perdition. Si les peres terriens gastent leurs enfans quand ils les tiennent trop mignards, il est certain que nous sommes encores plus depravez si Dieu ne nous chastie, et qu’il ne nous monstre quelque signe de severité: car nous abusons de sa bonté à tous propos, comme l’experience le monstre.¹³⁶

In Sermon 63 Calvin went so far as to invite believers to turn themselves over to God in order to be purified from their sins:

Toutes fois que nous advisons de recourir à nostre Dieu, lui demandans qu’il lui plaise de nous purger de toutes nos iniquitez, qui sont cause des maux que nous endurons en ceste vie presente: et qu’il lui plaise nous supporter en nos infirmités, et nous faire sentir sa bonté, afin que nous ayons tousiours dequoi le glorifier, iusques à ce qu’il nous ait delivrez de ceste vie caduque, pour nous faire participans de sa gloire immortelle.¹³⁷

¹³¹ CO 33, 267

¹³² CO 35, 79

¹³³ CO 35, 273

¹³⁴ CO 34, 621

¹³⁵ CO 33, 289

¹³⁶ CO 33, 177

¹³⁷ CO 34, 26

5.2.4 Suffering as an educational tool

Together with the above-mentioned ideas, Calvin, having borrowed from Elihu's argumentation, believed that suffering should have a pedagogical and educative function. As Richard Stauffer pointed out, Calvin used to compare believers "à des enfants qui, ne repondant pas aux temognages d'amour de leur pere, doivent etre amènes à Lui a grans coups de baston."¹³⁸ In Sermon 145, Calvin wrote:

Il est vray que puis qu'il nous convie si doucement, c'est une grand' honte à nous qu'il faille qu'il nous attire par force à son service, et à grans coups de baston. Et est-ce une nature d'enfans, de se faire ainsi matter, et qu'on ne vueille point venir à son pere sinon par violence?¹³⁹

Following this educational perspective Calvin held that suffering, far from being a sign of God's absence, was, on the contrary "les archiers de Dieu,"¹⁴⁰ "ses artileries, ses lances, ses espees, quand il veut combatre contre ses ennemis,"¹⁴¹ and was, therefore, a visible sign of His providence. Nothing happened unless God willed it. In Sermon 140 the French Reformer went so far to hint that God would work in a paradoxical mode "sub contraria specie."

Il est vrai que l'Ecriture prononce, que le naturel de Dieu est d'estre benin d'estre patient et amiable, de supporter les infirmes, d'user de misericorde encores qu'on l'ait offensé. Puis qu'ainsi est, quand il nous chastie, et qu'il se monstre dur et aspre, il est certain qu'il se transfigure, par maniere de dire, qu'il ne suit point son naturel: mais il faut qu'il use d'une telle rudesse à cause de nostre malice, pource que nous sommes bestes sauvages, que nous sommes tellement desbordez, que quand il nous veut recueillir à soi benignement, il y a

¹³⁸ R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 279

¹³⁹ CO 35, 336

¹⁴⁰ CO 34, 18

¹⁴¹ CO 35, 393

incontinent quelque morsure, que nous regimbons contre lui. Il faut donc que nous sentions nostre perversité toutes fois et quantes que Dieu use de rudesse contre nous.¹⁴²

In this text Calvin seemed to echo Martin Luther's intuitions: God hid Himself in His revelation and works "sub contraria specie." His wisdom was hidden under foolishness, His power under weakness. He brought salvation, by judging and damning.¹⁴³ God loved those whom he afflicted and to those whom he gave, even while He was taking away.

Calvin also interpreted God's correction as a testimony that God was ready to forgive a person's sins, if he acknowledged his faults.¹⁴⁴ Commenting the text "behold, happy is the man whom God corrects; therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty,"¹⁴⁵ in Sermon 21 Calvin went so far to state that this was the opportunity available to believers through God's chastisement.

Il faut donc pour se monstrier Pere envers nous, qu'il use de rigueur, veu que nous sommes d'une nature si difficile, que s'il usoit de douceur envers nous, nous n'en pourrions pas faire nostre profit. Voila comme nous pourrions apprehender la verité de ceste doctrine, Que l'homme que Dieu chastie, est bien heureux : c'est assavoir quand nous cognoistrans quelle est nostre nature,

¹⁴² CO 35, 287

¹⁴³ As A. McGrath reminded: "The most significant statements relating to Luther's theology are to be found in theses 19 and 20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* on 26 April 1518, in which the German reformer wrote: "The man who looks upon the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be called a theologian." (*Non ille dignus theologus dicitur, qui invisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciunt.*)

"The man who perceives the visible rearwards parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does, however deserve to be called a theologian." (*Sed qui visibilia et posteriora Dei per passionem et crucem conspecta intelligit.*) *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1985), p. 148

¹⁴⁴ "Et ainsi, Dieu nous afflige-il? c'est signe qu'il ne veut point que nous perissions, mais plustost il nous sollicite de retourner à soy. Car les corrections sont autant de tesmoignages que Dieu est prest de nous recevoir à merci, quand nous aurons cognu nos fautes, et que nous luy en demanderons pardon sans feintise." (CO 33, 259-260)

¹⁴⁵ Job 5:17

combien elle est revesche, combien elle est difficile à, renger, et que iamais Dieu ne nous chastie que ce ne soit pour nostre profit, qu'il est besoin qu'il nous tiene en bride courte, et qu'il nous donne tant de coups de fouet, que nous soyons contraints de regarder à, luy. Lors donc nous viendrons à conclurre, Bien-heureux est l'homme que Dieu chastie.¹⁴⁶

The French Reformer also carefully enumerated the several ends that afflictions might achieve. In Sermon 69, he wrote:

Car en premier lieu nous aurons beaucoup profité, si nous avons retenu ceste leçon, Que Dieu quelquesfois afflige les hommes, non point en considerant leurs pechez, mais pource qu'il les veut humilier, pource qu'il veut monstrier qu'il a toute autorité par dessus ses creatures, et qu'il les a ordonnees comme miroirs de patience: pource qu'il leur veut faire sentir leurs infirmités, afin qu'ils se cognoissent tant mieux, quand ils auront apperceu qu'il y a des vices cachez en eux qui se descouvrent par les afflictions, et qu'ils n'ont point eu constance telle qu'il estoit requis, mais qu'ils ont fleschi: et quand ils se seront ainsi veus comme trebuschez, qu'ils soyent tant plus incitez à invoquer Dieu, cognoissans que s'il ne leur eust tendu la main, c'estoit fait deux.¹⁴⁷

The following are the most significant of the most important "ends." Through the experience of suffering, believers were not only able to be known,¹⁴⁸ but were also able to face the unsolved problems of human existence: "Qui suis-ie? qu'est-ce que de moy? Et pourquoy est-ce que ie suis ainsi affligé?"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ CO 33, 263

¹⁴⁷ CO 34, 97

¹⁴⁸ In Sermon 5 Calvin advanced the hypothesis that "Dieu esprouve les siens, il les examine par afflictions, il les met comme un or en la fournaise, non seulement pour estre purgez, mais aussi pour estre cognus." (CO 33, 69)

¹⁴⁹ CO 33, 95

Suffering was a means of humiliating true believers,¹⁵⁰ as Calvin reminded his listeners in Sermon 69:

Car en premier lieu nous aurons beaucoup profité, si nous avons retenu ceste leçon, que Dieu quelquesfois afflige les hommes, non point en considerant leurs pechez, mais pource qu'il les veut humilier, pource qu'il veut monstrier qu'il a toute autorité par dessus ses creatures, et qu'il les a ordonnees comme miroirs de patience: pourcequ'il leur veut faire sentir leurs infirmités, afin qu'ils se cognoissent tant mieux, quand ils auront apperceu qu'il y a des vices cachez en eux qui se descouvrent par les afflictions, et qu'ils n'ont point eu constance telle qu'il estoit requis, mais qu'ils ont fleschi: et quand ils se seront ainsi veus comme trebuschez, qu'ils soyent tant plus incitez à invoquer Dieu, cognoissans que s'il ne leur eust tendu la main, c'estoit fait deux.¹⁵¹

Affliction was the true schoolmaster "pour amener les hommes à repentance, afin qu'ils se condamnent devant Dieu, et s'estans condamnez apprenent à hayr leurs fautes, ausquelles auparavant ils se baignoyent."¹⁵² Suffering, also, might become the occasion whereby a man examined his conscience and became aware of his faults.

Apprenons donc si Dieu nous visite, et que nos afflictions soyent grandes, de chercher bien la cause pourquoy, et d'examiner: Or ç'à i'ayeuy moyen d'aider à ceux qui avoyent faute des biens de ce monde: comment les ay-ie secourus? M'en suis-ie acquité? S'il y a eu quelqu'un qui ait eu faute de mon secours, ay-ie tasché de lui donner aide? Si on est venu vers moi, ay-ie esté prest de communiquer de ma substance? Si nous cognoissons cela, gemissons devant

¹⁵⁰ The phrase "nous humilier" recurs in various contexts 136 times.

¹⁵¹ CO 34, 97 In Sermon 20 Calvin linked affliction with poverty and wrote: "Affligé, signifie aussi bien Humble. Et pourquoy? D'autant que la povreté est la vraye maistresse pour induire les hommes à modestie, afin qu'ils ne s'eslevent point par trop en eux, qu'il n'y ait point ceste audace, et yvrongnerie spirituelle d'ainsi se hazarder: mais qu'ils cheminent selon leur mesure, cognoissans que si Dieu ne leur survenoit à chacune minute de temps, ils seroyent perdus." CO 33, 255

¹⁵² CO 35, 270

Dieu, et cognoissons qu'il nous fait une grand' grace de nous admonnester de nos fautes.¹⁵³

Affliction might prompt one to prayer and to take refuge in God.¹⁵⁴

The chastisement of God could spur one to learn “d'estre patiens”¹⁵⁵ and to conceive earthly life as perpetual warfare. Believers were to be ready for battle, as he pointed out:

Sous ce mot de combat, la condition de la vie présente nous est exprimée, c'est qu'estans pèlerins en ce monde il faut que nous bataillions, que nous soyons assiégés de toutes parts, que nous soyons en péril continuel, que nous soyons tentés maintenant de sollicitudes, maintenant de quelque affliction, maintenant de quelque danger: que donc nous pensions à cela.¹⁵⁶

He warned that “quand Dieu nous afflige, nous ne devons point souhaiter la mort, mais plustost nous disposer au combat, puis que telle est la volonté de Dieu.”¹⁵⁷

In the course of writing *Sermons on Job*, Calvin insisted innumerable times that the fight in which Christians were engaged was “spiritual,”¹⁵⁸ “continuel,”¹⁵⁹ and “assiduel.”¹⁶⁰ Christian faith had to deal with conflicts and tensions every day: “Car la foy n'est iamais sans combats, il faut bien qu'elle soit bien exercée.”¹⁶¹ Before inheriting eternal life the believer had to live in this world where wickedness reigned

¹⁵³ CO 34, 285 and 290

¹⁵⁴ CO 33, 245-246: “Pourquoy est-ce qu'il leur envoie tant de maux, qu'ils soupirent et gemissent, ne sachans de quel côté se tourner? C'est afin qu'ils l'invoquent, qu'ils ayent leur refuge à luy. Nous voyons donc comme par les afflictions nous sommes enseignés premièrement de nous cognoistre afin de ne rien presumer de nous, de n'estre point enflés de fierté et d'arrogance: et puis afin de ne nous point esgayer par trop en nos cupiditez, mais plustost renoncer aux choses de ce monde, et finalement invoquer Dieu: car c'est le principal que cela.”

¹⁵⁵ CO 34, 293

¹⁵⁶ CO 33, 692

¹⁵⁷ CO 33, 296

¹⁵⁸ CO 33, 363 and 611

¹⁵⁹ CO 33, 271

¹⁶⁰ CO 33, 254-255

¹⁶¹ CO 33, 686

sovereign and he had to fight not only against evildoers,¹⁶² but also against his selfish impulses which were in deep contrast to the will of God.¹⁶³

In the course of this continuous fight the believer was doomed to be subjected to many afflictions both physical and spiritual.

In Sermon 93, Calvin, even though he considered unjustified suffering a scandal, recognised another positive function in suffering, which is to say that it spurred us to learn “d’estre pelerins en ce monde, d’estre errans,”¹⁶⁴ “voyagers et vagabons,”¹⁶⁵ and in doing so portrayed the Christian life as a journey or a pilgrimage.¹⁶⁶ He reminded also that “nostre paradis n’est point en ce monde.”¹⁶⁷ There is no space for a restless existence. Given the perspective of life “conceived as a succession of ardent and strenuous moments,” as Bouwsma pointed out: “Calvin directed attention toward the cultivation of self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, spiritual strength and a joyful acceptance of God’s will.”¹⁶⁸

The believers need to turn their eyes toward God was particularly stressed in Sermon 100:

¹⁶² CO 33, 126, CO 35, 55 and 485

¹⁶³ “Il nous faut bataïler, suivant ce que nous dit l’Apostre (2. Tim. 2, 5), Que nous n’aurons point de victoire sinon en combatant. Or le principal combat que nous ayons à faire c’est contre nous-mêmes, et contre nos vices: et c’est où il nous faut efforcer. Ainsi donc notons bien, que Iob, quand il parle ici de la vie humains comme un homme qui n’a point d’esgard à la resurrection à venir, ne s’est point arresté là du tout (car il avoit bien preveu ce qui en est) mais il a voulu exprimer quelle passion il a senti, afin qu’un chacun de nous pense à soy, pour n’estre point transporté quand telles tentations adviendront.” CO 33, 679-680

¹⁶⁴ CO 34, 397

¹⁶⁵ CO 34, 490 and 397

¹⁶⁶ CO 34, 397: “Or ceci nous est déclaré, afin que quand nous voyons de tels exemples, nous ne soyons point troublez (comme il a esté dit) mais plustost qu’estans premupis contre un tel scandale, nous cognoissions que nostre Seigneur permet que les choses soyent ainsi enveloppees, afin que nous tendions à l’heritage auquel il nous appelle: que nous ne facions point ici nostre nid, comme si nous y avions un repos certain: mais plustost que nous apprenions d’estre pelerins en ce monde, d’estre errans: et que quand il n’y aura nulle fermeté pour nous (comme saint Paul dit, que c’est la condition des Chrestiens, d’estre remuez çà et là) nous sachions faire nostre profit de toutes ces choses: car iusques à ce que Dieu nous ait arrachez de ce monde comme par force, nous ne serons point adonnez à tendre à la vie celeste.”

¹⁶⁷ CO 34, 147

¹⁶⁸ W. Bouwsma, *John Calvin, a Sixteenth Century Portrait*, p. 186

Dieu ne veut pas amener les choses maintenant à perfection, afin de nourrir nostre esperance: et que nous ne soyons point addonnez à ce monde, que nous ne cerchions point nostre felicité ici bas comme en un paradis: mais que nous ayons nos yeux eslevez en haut, et quo nous passions tant plus legerement par ici bas comme par un chemin, et que nous cognoissions que nous sommes en ce monde, et pourtant qu'il nous faut tousiours aspirer à cest heritage celeste et permanent.¹⁶⁹

Believers were not to be idle but were called to demonstrate how they had responded daily to God's vocation.¹⁷⁰

From the perspective of a life conceived as a trial, one then can understand some of the harsh statements made by the French Reformer that God “veut que nous passions parmi le feu et l'eau, c'est à dire, par beaucoup de miseres.”¹⁷¹ In some sermons there also emerged the idea that God had been forced to become severe because of human perversion: “Car nous ne pouvons souffrir qu'il nous soit un pere amiable, et qu'il nous traite doucement, nous abusons tousiours de sa bonté: il faut donc qu'il nous face sentir son ire, ou autrement nous serions perdus.”¹⁷²

5.3 The excluded lines of defense

This chapter would be incomplete if I did not consider the lines of defense which Calvin ruled out “de facto.” The first of these was related to the role played by Christ

¹⁶⁹ CO 34, 489-490

¹⁷⁰ “Advisons donc de continuer iusques à la fin, quand nous aurons bien commencé, et qu'estans assurez que c'est Dieu qui nous a tendu la main, nous suivions le chemin auquel il nous a mis. Mais au reste, qu'un chacun conte bien le temps depuis qu'il a cognu la verité de Dieu. Comment? il y a desia un an, il y en a trois, il y en a dix, il y en a vingt que Dieu s'est manifesté à moi: et comment ai-ie profité depuis ce temps-là? Et maintenant encores, combien que ie ne me sois point tant avancé comme il est requis, toutes fois puis que mon Dieu m'a receu en sa maison, et n'a point permis que ie fusse du tout esgaré, mais m'a fait la grace de perseverer iusques ici: si maintenant ie le renonce, et le quitte, et que sera-ce?” CO 34, 461

¹⁷¹ CO 33, 179

¹⁷² CO 35, 286

in the widest context of Calvin vindication of God's justice. In his Ph.D dissertation P. Miln, taking inspiration from W. Niesel,¹⁷³ emphasized on many occasions "the intensely Christocentric nature of the Sermons on Job"¹⁷⁴ and tried to substantiate this assumption, by demonstrating that "it is only by an imitation of Christ that we are enabled to live the Christian life."¹⁷⁵ What Miln pointed out is true. Undoubtedly, Christ represents the constant element of the *Sermons on Job*. It is important to remember the innumerable times that Calvin emphasised the role of Christ. Christ is "le seul nostre advocate,"¹⁷⁶ "le seul nostre Redempteur"¹⁷⁷ and "la parole eternelle de Dieu,"¹⁷⁸ "tous les thresors de sagesse et d'intelligence sont cachez en luy"¹⁷⁹. His task is "de nous reconcilier a Dieu, son pere."¹⁸⁰

Even eschatological hope is strictly connected with Him.¹⁸¹ In Sermon 89, in response to the question: "qui osera ouvrir la bouche pour plaider contre le Iuge celeste?," Calvin didn't hesitate to answer:

Il faut que nous ayons Iesus Christ pour nostre advocat: et lui, en plaidant nostre cause, n'allegue pas nos merites, il ne s'oppose pas pour dire, que Dieu nous fait tort quand il nous punira: mais il met en avant la satisfaction qu'il a

¹⁷³ W. Niesel, *Theologie Calvins* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957), p. 235: "Jesus Christus beherrscht nicht nur den Inhalt, sondern auch die Form des Calvinistischen Denkens."

¹⁷⁴ P. Miln, *Hommes d'une bonne cause: Calvin's Sermons on the book of Job* (Ph.D diss., University of Nottingham: The British Library, 1989), p. 98: "Whilst dealing with an Old Testament theme, Calvin is still able to proclaim the centrality of Jesus Christ. Christian life must be centred upon the person and the life of Christ. We return, therefore, to the intensely Christocentric nature of the Sermons on Job."

¹⁷⁵ Miln, *Hommes d'une bonne cause*, p. 125

¹⁷⁶ CO 33, 69; CO 34, 43; 344, 346; CO 35, 506

¹⁷⁷ CO 34, 38, 389 and 617

¹⁷⁸ CO 34, 411

¹⁷⁹ CO 35, 247

¹⁸⁰ CO 35, 371

¹⁸¹ "Dieu nous purge de toutes nos ordures et infections, comme il nous l'a promis au nom de notre Seigneur Iesus Christ, iusques à ce qu'il nous ait retirez des souillures, et pollutions de ce monde, pour nous conioindre avec ses Anges, et nous faire participans de ceste felicité eternelle, laquelle nous devons maintenant aspirer." CO 33, 33

faite, et que puis qu'il nous a acquitez de nos dettes, maintenant nous sommes absous devant Dieu.¹⁸²

Yet the continuous references to Christ are far from implying that *Sermons on Job* are Christocentric, or that the person of Christ represents the heart of Calvin's vindication of the justice of God. Christ is present but His presence plays more a formal, than a substantial role. This element is particularly evident in Sermon 1 in which Calvin anticipated the arguments for his vindication of God. On the one hand, he emphasized the "pure doctrine de Jesus Christ",¹⁸³ and the fact that man was called to be inspired by Christ,¹⁸⁴ reminding believers that their lives were hidden in Jesus Christ.¹⁸⁵ On the other hand, the French Reformer failed to address the essential question: How had the revelation in Christ modified the vindication of God's justice and how would believers be able to look at Job's sufferings in a different way? Undoubtedly the themes of justification through faith and of free salvation are present, but only in the background, whereas the Reformer's answers to the anguishing problem of human suffering were given quite exclusively from the viewpoint of the Old Testament.

As T. Derek observes:

Calvin in many instances, preached entire sermons, even successive sermons, without ever seeing a need to focus on Christ as the fulfillment and scope of Scripture. Over a third of these sermons fail to mention Christ at all. Barely over a fifth of the sermons find Calvin concluding his message with a

¹⁸² CO 34, 395. See also CO 34, 43: "Et mesmes voila nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ, auquel est donnee toute puissance de iuger, qui est pour maintenir nostre cause, il est nostre advocat."

¹⁸³ "Or par cela nous voyons quand nous avons un bon fondement, qu'il nous faut regarder de bastir dessus, en sorte que tout responde, comme Saint Paul dit, (1. Cor. 3, 10) qu'il bastit bien, puis qu'il a fondé l'Eglise sur la pure doctrine de Iesus Christ." CO 33, 23-24

¹⁸⁴ CO 33, 30: "Et pourquoy? s'il y a rondeur, il faut qu'il y ait droiture, c'est à dire, si l'affection est pure au dedans, quand nous conversons avec les hommes, nous procurerons le bien d'un chacun, tellement que nous ne serons point adonnez à nous, et à nostre particulier, mais nous aurons ceste equité, que Iesus Christ dit ester la reigle de vie, et toute la somme de la Loy, et des Prophetes, que nous ne facions à aucun sinon ce que nous voudrions qu'on nous feist."

¹⁸⁵ "Nostre vie est cachée en Iesus Christ." CO 33, 159, 402

Christological focus. Seventeen sermons, just over a tenth, allude to passages of Scripture cited by Jesus in the Gospels. In fact, only a handful of sermons have what we might term an extensive Christological focus.¹⁸⁶

Was there any precise theological reason for this? S. Schreiner has suggested that the reason why *Sermons on Job* were not particularly Christocentric “would depend, on its pagan setting.”¹⁸⁷ In fact in the opening sermon Calvin made clear that Job was from the Land of Uz.

This motivation is irrelevant. The reason why Christ played a secondary role in the sermons is because his interpretation of the book of Job was centred on the question of theodicy, (how was it possible to justify belief in an Omnipotent and Righteous God in the presence of so much evil that existed in the world?) rather than a soteriological question (how can I be saved?) “Rebus sic stantibus,” all the questions related to the latter theme were secondary.

Job didn’t ask how it was possible to be saved, but instead challenged the notion of God’s justice. It is not by chance that the theme of “Justice” occurs 744 times. Fully aware that Job hadn’t known the revelation of Christ, Calvin refused to apply the New Testament to the book of Job in a retroactive manner. Herein lies the reason why it was difficult to find as many warnings against the attempts to know God apart from Christ in *Sermons on Job*, as in, say, *Commentary on the First Letter of the Apostle Peter*.¹⁸⁸ This lack of interest in soteriological concerns also explains

¹⁸⁶ T. Derek, *Calvin’s teaching on Job*, p.333. R. Stauffer, after having quoted Calvin’s *Commentary on John* 5,39, wrote: “Les sermons ou retentit le même accent christologique sont peu nombreux.” *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 109

¹⁸⁷ S. Schreiner, “Calvin as an interpreter of Job,” in *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), p. 68

¹⁸⁸ J Calvin, *Commentaries, on the first epistle of Peter*, Vol. XXII. 53: “Since God is incomprehensible, faith could never reach to Him, except it had an immediate regard to Christ. Nay, there are two reasons why faith could not be in God, except Christ intervened as a Mediator: first, the greatness of the divine glory must be taken to the account, and at the same time the littleness of our capacity. Our acuteness is doubtless very far from being capable of ascending so high as to

the reason why Calvin, instead of proclaiming God's grace and reconciliation in Jesus Christ, pointed to God in His triune fullness in order to vindicate His justice which had been brought into profound questioning by human suffering. Another explanation for the secondary role Calvin assigned to the person of Jesus Christ might be found in Calvin's assumption that God, as He was in Himself, was different from the God as was revealed in Christ.

C.J. Kinlaw wrote:

Calvin's God is mysterious, ineffable, ceaseless, active and utterly free. The urge to flee to Christ can be a psychological and spiritual sedative only for those who have not realized that the hidden, inscrutable God is the one with whom we have everything to do. This may lead us to distrust the entire basis of our knowledge of God. If God's accommodating revelation serves the hidden God, can we certainty of any knowledge of God apart from God's inscrutability?¹⁸⁹

Unquestionably, Calvin didn't employ the New Testament to interpret the book of *Job*. He argued and reasoned quite exclusively from the point of view of the Old

comprehend God. Hence all knowledge of God without Christ is a vast abyss which immediately swallows up all our thoughts. A clear proof of this we have, not only in the Turks and the Jews, who in the place of God worship their own dreams, but also in the Papists. Common is that axiom of the schools, that God is the object of faith. Thus of hidden majesty, Christ being overlooked, they largely and refinedly speculate; but with what success? They entangle themselves in astounding dotages, so that there is no end to their wanderings. For faith, as they think, is nothing else but an imaginative speculation." CO 55, 226: "Nam quum incomprehensibilis sit Deus, nunquam ad eum perveniet fides, nisi in Christum recta se conferat. Imo duae sunt rationes cur nulla possit esse fides in Deum, nisi Christus quasi medius interveniat. Nam primo consideranda est divinae gloriae magnitudo, et simul ingenii nostri tenuitas. Multum certe abest quin acies nostra tam alte conscendere possit, ut Deum apprehendat. Omnis itaque cogitatio de Deo extra Christum immensa est abyssus quae sensus omnes nostros protinus absorbeat. Huius rei luculentum exstat specimen non in Turcis modo et Iudaeis, qui sub Dei titulo somnia sua adorant: sed etiam in papistis. Tritum est illud scholarum axioma, Deum esse obiectum fidei. Ita de abscondita eius maiestate, praeterito Christo, prolixè et argute philosophantur: sed quo successu? Miris deliriis se intricant, ut nullus sit errandi finis. Fidem enim nihil esse putant nisi imaginariam speculationem."

¹⁸⁹ C. J. Kinlaw, "Determinism and the Hiddenness of God in Calvin's Theology," *Religious Studies* 24.4 (1988): 509

Testament. Therefore, the most important feature of *Sermons on Job* was not its Christocentricity but its Theocentricity, as Viguié aptly pointed out:

Ces pages sont pleines de Dieu, ne respirent que Lui; c'est Dieu qui nous doit mener, diriger, inspirer, que dis-je? Il est le maître absolu, c'est Lui qui nous mène, nous dirige, nous inspire. Il nous prend à Lui, nous fait siens, nous marque de son sceau, nous garde pour la vie éternelle.¹⁹⁰

It would be an exaggeration to say that Christ was substantially absent in *Sermons on Job*,¹⁹¹ yet one conclusion can be drawn with certainty, that a consistent christological focus was not sustained.¹⁹²

As Richard Stauffer reminds his reader: “Au contraire de Luther qui est attaché au principe en vertu duquel le Christ est *dominus Scripturae*, Calvin ne cherche pas toujours à voir en Jésus le *scopus* du texte qu'il étudie.”¹⁹³ Undoubtedly Calvin had difficulty in elevating Christ to be the main interpretative key of the Old Testament. Since in *Sermons on Job* did not focus on human salvation, but rather the centrality of God's justice, one can understand the scarce incidences of the doctrines of election and predestination, which many scholars, especially in the 19th century had believed to be the central themes of Calvin's theology¹⁹⁴. A critical investigation won't support the conclusion that “Job's position is basically a faith in God's gracious, unconditional election.”¹⁹⁵ First of all, the word “predestination” with all its

¹⁹⁰ Viguié, “Les Sermons de Calvin sur le livre de Job.” *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du Protestantisme Français*, Vo. 31 (1982):. pp. 506-507

¹⁹¹ The sermons in which christological notions are present are 41, 42, 43, 52 and 71.

¹⁹² In his book *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 149, Alister McGrath contended that “Jesus Christ forms the central feature of Calvin's theology.”

¹⁹³ Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 303

¹⁹⁴ Alexander Schweizer, *Die protestantische Central dogma in ihrer Entwicklung innerhalb der Reformierten Kirche*, (Zuerich: Orell, Fuessli, 1854) and Otto Ritschel, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus*, III (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926)

¹⁹⁵ E. Dekker, *Sermon from Job* (Ed. Nixon, Grand Rapids, Baker 1980), XXXIII

derivates didn't occur at all, while the word "election" occurred only twenty times.¹⁹⁶ Even when this concept appeared to be taken into account, the French Reformer's attention was turned in quite another direction.¹⁹⁷ Most of the time, the problem of election was not dealt within the context of soteriology, but rather within the context of the incomprehensibility of God¹⁹⁸ and of the "liberum arbitrium."¹⁹⁹ Calvin constantly refused to make God a partaker of human suffering.

In this chapter we have mentioned the texts in which Calvin seemed to echo the intuitions of the *Theologia Crucis* of M. Luther. Nevertheless it would be reckless to conclude that "Calvin holds to *Theologia crucis*, as H. Selderhuis has suggested.²⁰⁰ B.A. Gerrish summed up the "status quaestionis" fittingly. After having distinguished between "the Hiddenness of God in His revelation (let us call it Hiddenness I) and the Hiddenness of God outside His revelation (Hiddenness II)," he comments: "The interesting question with regards to Hiddenness I is whether Calvin could follow

¹⁹⁶ CO 33, 408, 463, 502, 503, 535; CO 34, 362 ; CO 35, 150, 207, 212, 239, 470 and 471

¹⁹⁷ This is particularly evident in Sermon 134, in which, according to Richard Stauffer, the reformer "parlant du mystere de la predestination qui releve au premier chef du conseil secret, invite les croyants à ne pas rechercher les mobiles qui guident Dieu dans ses choix." *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 109

Analyzing this text one cannot help but to acknowledge that Calvin's intention was not to deal with the problem of predestination, but simply to answer to the eternal question why the evildoers triumph and the innocent perish. As a matter of fact in commenting the biblical text of Job 34:31, Calvin wrote: "Comme s'il disoit, que Dieu tient les cordeaux en sa main pour conduire les hommes à son plaisir: et s'il luy plaist de nous punir pour nos pechez, nous n'avons nulle repliche qu'il ne faille passer condamnation: s'il nous supporte, mesmes qu'il nous vueille du tout espargner, qui est-ce qui y resistera? qui est-ce qui le pourra empescher de nous faire grace? Il est vray que ceci est estrange de primeface au sens humain: car nous demandons: Veu que Dieu xi'accepte point les personnes, pourquoy pardonne-il plustost à l'un qu'à l'autre? Pourquoy supporte-il un meschant, quand on le voit estre desbordé du tout?" CO 35, 194-195

¹⁹⁸ For example in Sermon 31 Calvin wrote: Quand l'Escriture nous parle de son election, qu'il choisit ceux que bon lui semble, qu'il reiette aussi les autres, qu'il dispose du genre humain à son plaisir : aussi quand il afflige les bons et les laisse là opprimez, que nous voyons les choses tant confuses au monde, là Dieu se cache, c'est à dire, qu'il ne se monstre pas à nous en telle façon, que selon nostre sens nous puissions apprehender sa iustice, sa bonté, et vertu, et sagesse: et toutesfois si faut-il que nous lui rendions la gloire qui lui est due." CO 33, 463

¹⁹⁹ For instance in Sermon 33: CO 33, 407

²⁰⁰ H. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 188

Luther into the sharpest paradoxes of the *theologia crucis*, which culminate in the thought of the *deus crucifixus*.”²⁰¹

There were many reasons why Calvin rejected what Ronald Goetz has simply, and in a sense rightly, dubbed it, the “new orthodoxy.”²⁰² Firstly, there was the desire to defend the principle of the God’s impassibility and immutability. Calvin made use of the principle of accommodation whenever the Scriptures seemed to attribute human passions to God; emotions like jealousy, repentance, et cetera, which he constantly refused to interpret in a literal sense.²⁰³ Calvin maintained that it was impossible for God to change or that He could be sorrowful or sad, since this would imply “either that He is ignorant of what is going to happen, or cannot escape it, or hastily and rashly rushes into a decision of which He immediately has to repent.”²⁰⁴ Biblical texts describing God as repentant or sorrowful, according to Calvin, didn’t depict God as He truly was but only as He appeared to us. Using once again the principle of accommodation, Calvin interpreted some biblical passages which employed

²⁰¹ B.A. Gerrish, “To the unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973), p.280

²⁰² R. Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *The Christian Century* 103/13 (1986), 385

²⁰³ In *The Institutes* the French Reformer taking into consideration some biblical texts concerning God’s repentance, refused to interpret them in a literal sense and made recourse to the principle of the divine accommodation. He wrote: “Que signifie donc ce mot de Repentance? dira quelcun. Je respon qu’il a un mesme sens que toutes les autres formes de parler, lesquelles nous descrivent Dieu humainement. Car pource que nostre infirmité n’attouche point à sa hautesse, la description qui nous en est baillée se doit submettre à nostre capacité, pour estre entendue de nous. Or le moyen est, qu’il se figure, non pas tel qu’il est en soy, mais tel que nous le sentons. Combien qu’il soit exempt de toute perturbation, il se dit estre courroucé contre les pecheurs. Pourtant comme quand nous oyons que Dieu est courroucé, nous ne devons pas imaginer qu’il y ait quelque commotion en luy, mais plustost que ceste locution est prise de nostre sentiment, pource qu’il monstre apparence d’une personne courroucée, quand il exerce la rigueur de son iugement; ainsi1) sous le vocable de Penitence, nous ne devons concevoir sinon une mutation de ses oeuvres, pource que les hommes en changeant leurs oeuvres tesmoignent qu’elles leur desplaissent.” CO 03, 267-268

²⁰⁴ *ICR* I, 17.12. CO 02, 165: “Si enim nemo sciens ac volens se in poenitentiae necessitatem coniicit, Deo poenitentiam non tribuimus, quin aut ignorare dicamus quid futurum sit, aut effugere non posse, aut praecipitanter et inconsiderate ruere in sententiam cuius statim poeniteat.”

anthropomorphism, to suggest that God accommodates Himself to us like a nurse lisps to a young child.²⁰⁵

Calvin didn't believe God could experience real grief over God's creation because it was not in God's nature to change. Therefore if God was impassible und immutable, He could not suffer, as Calvin stated clearly in *The Institutes*, where he made a clear distinction between the divine and human natures of Christ:

Car entant qu'il est Dieu, il ne peut augmenter ne diminuer, et fait toutes choses pour l'amour de soy mesme, rien ne luy est caché, il ordonne et dispose tout comme il luy plaist, il est invisible et ne se peut manier : et toutesfois il n'attribue point toutes ces choses simplement à sa nature humaine, mais il les prend à soy comme convenantes à la personne du Mediateur. La communication des proprieté se prouve par ce que dit saint Paul, que Dieu s'est acquis l'Eglise par son sang. Item, que le Seigneur de gloire a esté crucifié. Mesmes ce que nous venons d'alleguer de saint Iean, que la Parolle de vie a esté touchée; car Dieu n'a point de sang et ne peut souffrir, ny estre touché des mains (Act. 20, 28; 1 Cor. 2, 8; 1 Iean 1, 1). Mais d'autant que Iesus Christ, qui estoit vray Dieu et vray homme, a esté crucifié et a espandu son sang pour nous: ce qui a esté fait en sa nature humaine est im proprement appliqué à la divinité, combien que ce ne soit pas sans raison.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ *ICR* 1. 13.1: "For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us?" CO 02, 90: "Quis enim, vel parum ingeniosus, non intelligit Deum ita nobiscum, ceu nutrices solent cum infantibus, quodammodo balbutire?" Other references can be found in Ford Lewis Battle, "God was accommodating Himself to human capacity," in *Interpreting John Calvin* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 124-125

²⁰⁶ CO 03, 547

As Theodore Minnema aptly pointed out, “Calvin consistently maintained not only that the divine nature in Christ does not suffer, but also generalizes this in relation to God.”²⁰⁷

In *The Institutes*, Calvin further elaborated this thought. He wrote:

En somme, d'autant que Dieu seul ne pouvoit sentir la mort, et l'homme ne la pouvoit veindre, il a conioint la nature humaine avec la sienne, pour assuiettir l'infirmité de la premiere à la mort, et ainsi nous purger et acquitter de nos forfaits: et pour nous acquerir victoire en vertu de la seconde, en soustenant les combats de la mort pour nous.²⁰⁸

The statement “Dieu seul ne pouvoit sentir la mort,” far from occurring accidentally, was also precisely the ending point of the theological tenets that I have tried to sum up in these last pages of this dissertation. Resisting any humanization of God, Calvin steadfastly maintained that “God is subject to no passions; and we know that no change takes place in Him.”²⁰⁹ People's suffering, crying and dying didn't involve the suffering, crying and dying of God. It is also worth noting that Calvin defended God's impassibility on the basis of the so-called principle of “extracalvinisticum” according to which, the Incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity maintained all essential divine properties, including impassibility and immutability, and therefore, could not be “confined within the narrow prison of an earthly body.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ T. Minnema, “Calvin's Interpretation of Human Suffering,” in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 148

T. Minnema quotes also *ICR* 4, 17. 30, where the French Reformer wrote: “Surely, when the Lord of glory is said to be crucified Paul does not mean that he suffered anything in his divinity, abut he says this because the same Christ, who was cast down and despised, and suffered in the flesh, was God and Lord of glory.”

²⁰⁸ CO 03, 526-527

²⁰⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on Hosea*, Vol. XIII, 88. 42, 401. CO 42, 443: “Nam semper illud habendum est, Deum immunem esse ab omni passione.”

²¹⁰ *ICR* 2.13.4. For further references see Paul Helm, “The Extra” in *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 58-92

Of course Calvin could be criticized, but it is very rare to find inconsistencies between his theological presuppositions and his vindication of God's justice. If God "dispose de toutes ses creatures il tient tout en sa main, et rien n'advient en ce monde de cas d'aventure, mais c'est selon sa volonté"²¹¹ and "gouverne tout par sa providence,"²¹² then everything that occurred had its genesis in God alone and it was preposterous to ask if God had caused or simply permitted evil. If God was working universally, then there was not a plurality of decision-makers. In this scenario the concept of a God who suffered with us, even though he could have eliminated the causes of suffering, turned out to be, in Calvin's opinion, utter nonsense. Realizing that the idea of a suffering God implied the notion of a limited God, Calvin never hesitated to stress God's omnipotence, as David Ray Griffin wrote, "without obfuscation."²¹³

5.4 Overview

The foregoing discussion reveals, unquestionably that the common denominator of Calvin's "first line defence of God's justice" was his desire to find reasons that would justify suffering. In his opinion, no worse evil could exist, than which is irrational, uncontrolled, and without purpose. To believe that human beings were subjected to blind forces of chance was intolerable to him. If God was good and just, then, so Calvin argued, suffering must have a meaning. Employing this perspective, the Reformer took care to explain the purposes of suffering, which are reducible to the following three categories: the retributive, the educative, the curative.

²¹¹ CO 35, 69

²¹² CO 35, 69 and 300

²¹³ This is the title of chapter 10 of the book of D. R. Griffin *God, Power & Evil* (Louisville-London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), p.116

Inevitably, as Susan Schreiner pointed out, “Calvin’s dogged defence of retributive suffering places him in the familiar but uncomfortable position of supporting those who are reprov’d in the end,”²¹⁴ but this fact didn’t worry him. Calvin made use of this interpretation’s key extensively, sometimes even at the cost of forcing the meaning of the text. What mattered more, for him, was to convey to all his listeners the reassuring image of a God who loves those whom He afflicts²¹⁵ and bring them to eternal salvation. At the same time he was fully aware that all the above-mentioned arguments belonged to a so-called “first line defence” which couldn’t exhaust the vindication of God’s justice. It was certainly true, he argued, that when God punished evildoers, this derived from His revealed justice, but what might explain the fact that bad things happen to good people? In response to this question, Calvin, for the first time, in *Sermons on Job*, developed the concepts of “double justice” and of “double wisdom,” as we will see in the next chapter.

²¹⁴ Susan Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be found?* p. 99

²¹⁵ CO 33, 85

Chapter VI

The “second line of defence” for God’s justice:

“The Deus Absconditus”

As discussed in the previous chapter, the arguments which belonged to a “first line of defence” placed Calvin in the uncomfortable position of having to defend the opinions of those who, in the end, were condemned. As Susan Schreiner aptly pointed out:

Like previous commentators, Calvin feels compelled to rescue what he considers the incontrovertible moral truth taught by Job’s companions. He too is convinced that one cannot deny the teachings in such statements as Job 4:7-8 (“think now, I pray you, who that was ever innocent perished? Or were the upright ever cut off?”), 4:17 (“can man be more just than God? Can man be more pure than his Creator?”), and 8:3 (“Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty abolish what is right?”). Calvin adopts the traditional principle formulated by Gregory to defend the truth of these verses.¹

These considerations were confirmed at the beginning of the first sermon, wherein Calvin made the distinction that echoed throughout his subsequent sermons: Job maintained “a good quarrel, but did handle it ill,” whereas his friend “set forth an

¹ S. Schreiner, *Where shall Wisdom be found? Calvin’s exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 99

unjust matter, but did convey it well.”² Thus, to the question “comment est-ce que Iob maintient une cause qui est bonne?” he answered:

C'est qu'il cognoist que Dieu n'afflige pas tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez: mais qu'il a ses iugemens secrets, desquels il ne nous rend pas conte, et ce pendant qu'il faut que nous attendions iusques à ce qu'il nous revele pourquoy il fait ceci, ou cela. Il a donc tout ce propos persuadé, que Dieu n'afflige point tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez. Voila une cause qui est bonne et vraye, cependant elle est mal deduite: car Iob se iette ici hors des gonds et use de propos excessifs, et enormes, tellement qu'il se monstre un homme desesperé en beaucoup d'endroits. Or au contraire ceux qui soustiennent ceste mauvaise cause, que Dieu punit tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez, ont de belles sentences, et saintes, il n'ya rien en leurs propos qu'il ne nous faille recevoir, comme si le Saint Esprit l'avoit prononcé: car c'est pure verité, ce sont les fondemens de la religion, ils traittent de la Providence de Dieu, ils traittent de sa iustice, ils traittent des peschez des hommes. Voila donc une doctrine, laquelle nous avons à recevoir sans contredict, et toutesfois le but est mauvais, que ces gens icy taschent à, mettre Iob en desesper, et l'abysmer du tout.³

It is worth noting that these preliminary statements, however sincere, betrayed a deep discomfort, as this was not all that Calvin had to say about Job's experience. Despite his willingness to accept the fact that God could have good reasons for punishing Job, Calvin was overcome by an anxiety that he no longer recognized God's

² *Sermons of Maister Iohn Calvin, upon the Booke of Job*, translated by Arthur Golding (London: Henry Byneman, 1574; facsimile reprint: Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pa: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), p. 1

³ CO 33, 23-24

justice as manifested through His chastisements. Calvin's uneasiness was especially notable whenever he felt compelled to admit that Job's troubles and those of the persecuted church, however they might be interpreted, remained a great scandal⁴ and were the cause of many other troubles.⁵ Whenever he admitted these things, he urged the believers to be armed against such stumbling blocks⁶ and not to be discouraged.⁷ Repeatedly he asked: "Si cela est advenu à Iob qui estoit constant par dessus les autres, hélas ! que sera-ce de nous?"⁸ And yet, despite these doubts, he steadfastly refused to recognise the dilemma presented by those who asked him to choose between an impotent and an unjust God.

Il y en a d'autres, qui pour prouver que Dieu est iuste, veulent abolir la puissance: comme aujourdhui ceux qui ne peuvent souffrir qu'on presche que Dieu nous a esleus par sa bonté gratuite, et qu'il dispose toutes choses selon sa volonté, et que rien n'advient sinon comme il est ordonné et conduit par sa main. Car d'autant qu'ils ne peuvent digerer cela, ils viendront proposer, Et

⁴ CO 34, 369: "Vray est que Iob en a tenu icy devant long propos: mais nous savons que c'est un tel scandale, et si grand, que nous en sommes troublez à chacune fois: ie di, les plus parfaits. Si le mal continue, et que Dieu n'y mette point de remede, chacun se tormenté, et dispute-on, comment il est possible que Dieu soit si patient, et comme il dissimule tant, et qu'il semble qu'il soit comme endormi quand il permet ainsi tout. See also CO 34, 361: C'est un grand scandale pour ceux qui iugent selon leur sens humain, quand on voit que nostre Seigneur ne punit pas tousiours les meschans, mais qu'il les laisse aller comme, leur train commun: et puis quand ils meurent, que là encores on n'apperçoit sinon ce qui est commun et general en tous hommes."

⁵ CO 35, 232: "Voila donc un article qui est bien digne d'estre noté: car ce nous est un scandale qui nous trouble fort, voyans que Dieu laisse ainsi languir les hommes, et quand leurs miseres sont venues iusques à l'extremité, il ne semble point qu'il en ait nulle pitié."

⁶ CO 34, 371: "Que faut-il donc? que nous soyons armez contre tels scandales: et que quand Dieu ne se declare point luge, et qu'il semble plustost qu'il soit là enfermé au ciel, et qu'il se donne du bon temps, et qu'il ne se vueille point empescher de nos affaires: toutes fois nous tenions ceci pour conclu, qu'il ne laisse pas de faire son office: voire, mais c'est d'une façon qui nous est secrette et incogneue."

⁷ CO 34, 340-341: "Or ceci nous est declare, afin que quand nous voyons de tels exemples, nous ne soyons point troublez (comme il a este dit) mais plustost qu'estans premunis contre un tel scandale, nous cognoissions que nostre Seigneur permet que les choses soyent ainsi enveloppees afin que nous tendions à l'heritage auquel il Nous appelle: que nous ne facions point ici nostre nid, comme si nous y avions un repos certain: mais plustost que nous apprenions d'estre pelerins en ce monde."

⁸ CO 34, 105. The same question is echoed in CO 33, 155, 287, 353, 498; CO 34, 93, 105, 351; CO 35, 137, 221, 450

comment? Et ai Dieu en a ainsi choisi d'aucuns, et qu'il ait reprouvé les autres: il s'ensuivra qu'il a créé les hommes à perdition. Et cela est-il convenable à la iustice de Dieu? Et apres, si toutes choses se font par la volonté de Dieu, et veu qu'il y a tant de choses mauvaises, que dira-on là dessus? Or ces povres fols, ou plustost enragez, ne se peuvent humilier iusques là, de dire, Il est vrai que nous trouvons ces choses estranges, que Dieu ait créé des hommes qu'il ne vueille point sauver: mais cognoissons que la iustice de Dieu est trop haute et trop profonde pour nous: le iour viendra que nostre Seigneur nous rendra capables de cognoistre ce qui nous est maintenant caché. Il est dit (1. Cor. 13, 9 s.; 1. Iean 3, 2), que nous cognoissons en partie et en obscurité: mais quand nous serons semblables à lui, non seulement nous le verrons tel qu'il est, mais nous cognoistrans en perfection les choses qui maintenant ne nous sont point revelees.⁹

6.1 The Hiddenness of God

In order to emphasize the mystery of God in his Latin tracts, Calvin used different words: namely “arcanus,” “absconditus,” “occultus” which, according to Brian Gerrish, “tend to be used interchangeably”¹⁰ and could be translated, respectively in “secret,” “hidden” and “concealed.” Therefore, if one wishes to grasp the nuances of his vocabulary more fully, it is necessary to seek a deeper meaning for the terms he employed in French, his mother language. Although a comprehensive analysis of these

⁹ CO 34, 340

¹⁰ B. Gerrish, “To the unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *The Journal of Religion* 53. 3 (July, 1973), p. 282

expressions is outside the scope of the present essay, these elements are unquestionably important:

- 1) Instead of using three words, Calvin used only two, namely, “secret” and “cache.”
- 2) The use of the term “cache” was by far more frequent than of that one of “secret” (147 times as opposed to 45, respectively).
- 3) The word “secret” was Calvin's preference when he spoke of divine attributes such as: His Justice, His Wisdom, His Will, His Virtue, His Providence, His Power (inexplicably not His Majesty) as well as some other qualities.
- 4) With the term “secret” Calvin most often meant “not visible” in contraposition to “visible.”¹¹
- 5) Calvin employed the word “cache” in respect to a wide range of concepts and things so that it is difficult to find the common denominator. In particular, he spoke of human feelings and behaviours such as malice, vengeance, rebellion, hypocrisy, mistakes, hope, patience, bitterness, arrogance, the fear of God, and

¹¹ This is particularly clear in sermon 48 where he wrote: “Il y a ici trois choses mais il y en a deux visibles qui maintiennent les Princes: et la troisieme est secrette. Les deux choses visibles sont, la force et la prudence. Voila un Roy qui domine: comment est-ce qu'il a autorité? S'il est sage, ou bien s'il a conseillers experts, que les choses soyent bien conduites, qu'ils advisent de pres à ses affaires, et qu'ils y prouvoyent, voila un moyen. Le second est, quand un Roy aura gens, qu'il aura grandes munitions de guerre, qu'il sera bien allie qu'il aura forteresses en son pays. Voila donc les deux choses que nous appercevons, qui sont pour maintenir les royaumes, les principautez, les estats en ce monde: c'est assavoir la force et la prudence. Or Dieu renverse la force, et ainsi ce n'est plus rien: il osterà la sagesse à ceux qui sont bien entendus, et les voila tous eslourdis, tellement qu'ils ont moins de sens que les petis enfans. Il y a la troisieme chose qui est secrette au monde: c'est assavoir, que Dieu imprime une maiesté aux Princes, qu'ils sont honorez, et mesmes qu'on ne saura point pourquoy: comme il est dit en Daniel Que quand Dieu avoit voulu establir ceste grande monarchie de Chaldee, il avoit donné crainte et frayeur à toutes creatures.” CO 33, 597

terror. Significantly, in directing people's attention to Christ, he wrote that our life is 'hidden' in Him.¹²

- 6) Given the plurality of contexts, the meaning of the term “cache” is sometimes ambiguous. In Sermon 95, Calvin seemed to consider “cache” synonymous with “imperceptible.”¹³ If this were the meaning, it would follow that the sense of this word was broader than that of “secret.”
- 7) He applied the word “cache” to some of the attributes of God, employing it when he spoke of His Majesty,¹⁴ and of His Justice,¹⁵ but inexplicably, he did not use it to speak of His Providence and His Will. Sometimes, though, the words “secret” and “cache” were used in an interchangeable manner. This happened especially with the attributes of God's Justice, Wisdom and Virtue: For instance the word “justice” was described indifferently as “secrete et cache”¹⁶ and the same happens with the words “sagesse”¹⁷ and “vertu.”¹⁸

What prompted Calvin to take recourse to the concept of “Deus Absconditus?”

In response to this question one might offer various answers. Unlike previous theologians who started from within an exploration of mysticism to develop the notion of “Deus Absconditus,” (and contrary to some recently posited scholarly

¹² CO 33, 159, 402: “nostre vie est cachée en Iesus Christ.”

¹³ “Il y en a une autre qui est cachée de nous, que nous ne pouvons pas appercevoir, qu'on appelle le Pole Antarticque.” (CO 34, 430)

¹⁴ For example see: CO 33, 458

¹⁵ For example see: CO 33, 456, 496

¹⁶ CO 33, 471

¹⁷ “Secrete” in CO 33, 580 and 602; “cachée” in CO 33, 529, 585-586, 587, 622; CO 34, 609

¹⁸ “Secrete” in CO 33, 391; CO 34, 109, 427; “cachée” in CO 33, 757

theses),¹⁹ Calvin had little, if any, sympathy towards mysticism. On the contrary he firmly contested any form of annihilation of the person through asceticism and meditation. In relation to this the young Calvin wrote a treatise on the doctrine of soul's sleep. Karl Barth pointed out:

In Calvin the distinction between faith and mysticism is the beginning, the starting point. It is so because for him faith must be free at once for life, for ethos, for the glorifying of God in thinking, willing and doing. Nothing is more intolerable for him than an intermediate state, where the issue is not obedience.²⁰

In *The Institutes*, he stigmatized the lucubration of the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius *De Coelesti Hierarchia*: “But if anyone examine it more closely, he will find it for the most part nothing but talk. The theologian’s task is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences, by teaching things true, sure, and profitable.”²¹ Between God and humanity there is an insurmountable abyss that no human being can afford to overstep. Any pretension about being able to reach a mystical identification with God independently of the revelation of His word was consequently ruled out, since this would have implied the nullification of any distinction between God and His creature. Calvin repeatedly warned against the risk

¹⁹ Recently Dennis Tamburello in *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) has tried to demonstrate the close relationship between the concept of *unio mystica* used by the French Reformer and the medieval mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux. See also Carl A. Keller, *Calvin Mystique* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2001)

²⁰ K. Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 151

²¹ *ICR* 1. 14. 4. CO 03, 195: “mais si quelcun espluehe de plus pres les matieres, il trouvera que pour la plus grand part il n'y a que pur babil. Or un Théologien ne doit pas appliquer son estude à delecter les oreilles en iasant, mais de confermer les consciences en enseignant choses vrayes, certaines et utiles.”

of being engaged in “extravagantes,”²² “folles,”²³ “vaines speculations.”²⁴ Earthly knowledge of God was doomed to remain necessarily limited. Through God’s revelation believers were granted the knowledge that is necessary for salvation and it was useless to seek to know more. The principle of “Sola Scriptura,” originally intended by the Reformers to circumscribe the power of the Roman Catholic Church, also functioned as a restriction on any form of mystical yearning.

The second thing that prompted Calvin to employ the notion of “divine hiddenness” was the desire to avoid any form of scholastic intellectualism. His theology was without any pretension of undertaking a demonstration of God’s existence. According to Calvin humans were unable to understand God, much less demonstrate His existence. Calvin often has been charged with having over-intellectualized Christian faith.²⁵ Undoubtedly he was essentially a rationalist and repeatedly attached importance to the “doctrine,” which “est beaucoup plus precieuse que ne sont pas les personnes.”²⁶ Given certain principles, the deductions that logically followed must have been necessarily true. All his theology was permeated by

²² CO 35, 480

²³ CO 34, 523 and CO 35, 520

²⁴ CO 33, 625; CO 34, 353, 515

²⁵ According to M. Ferdinand Brunetière, Calvin has intellectualized religion and reduced it to a form which can appeal only to the reasonable, or rather to the reasoning man. “In that oratorical work which he called *The Institutes*,” M. Brunetière wrote, “If there is any movement . . . it is not one which comes from the heart. . . and- I am speaking here only of the writer or the religious theorizer, not of the man - the insensibility of Calvin is equalled only by the rigor of his reasoning The religion, according to Calvin, consists essentially, almost exclusively, in the adhesion of the intellect to truths all but demonstrated, and commends itself by nothing except by the literalness of its agreement with a text - which is a matter of pure philology - and by the solidity of its logical edifice - which is nothing but a matter of pure reasoning” To Calvin, he adds, “religious truth attests itself in no other manner and by no other means than mathematical truth. As he would reason on the properties of a triangle, or of a sphere, so Calvin reasons on the attributes of God. All that will not adjust itself to the exigencies of his dialectic, he contests or he rejects . . . Cartesian before Descartes, rational evidence, logical in contradiction are for him the test or the proof of truth. He would not believe if faith did not stay itself on a formal syllogism. From a ‘matter of the heart’, if I may so say, Calvin transformed religion into an ‘affair of the intellect’. *Discours de combat*, 1903, pp. 135-140. I owe this quotation to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” from *The Princeton Theological Review*, vii 1909, pp. 381-436

²⁶ CO 34, 208

a geometric precision. Bernard Cottret, comments: “His thought remained permeated with the rigor, the geometry, the fascination, and the memory of the law.”²⁷ “The God of Calvin, like the later one of the *philosophes*, was equipped with a square and compass.”²⁸

Just as he would have reasoned on the properties of a triangle or a sphere, so Calvin, “Cartesian” before Descartes, conceived the task of the theologian and one can wonder if Calvin’s distinction between the ‘two realms’—the “forum conscientiae” and the “forum externum”—had a strong resonance with Descartes’ distinction between “res cogitans” and “res extensa.”²⁹ However, he never considered faith to be a merely intellectual assent to certain doctrinal statements. His rationalism was more formal than a philosophical rationalism, as John Leith reminds us: “Calvin’s theology is not rationalistic in the Stoic or 18th century sense. It is not a rationalism of material, but of form in which the dogmatic material appear, by which they are bound together and in which they are expressed and systematized.”³⁰

Although Calvin tried to express his convictions in rational terms, he never hinted that human logic, by itself, and independently of God’s revelation, could attain a perfect knowledge of God. He jealously defended the mystery of God, and in order to safeguard His wholly Otherness, insisted that we are not in position to understand

²⁷ B. Cottret, *Calvin a Biography*, p. 21

²⁸ B. Cottret, *Calvin a Biography*, p. 298

²⁹ I owe this remark to my Supervisor Dr. Torrance Kirby.

³⁰ “Calvin’s Awareness of the Holy and the Enigma of His Theology: What Is Reformed Calvinist Theology?” in *Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian: Collected Shorter Writings*, ed. Charles E. Raynal (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), p. 172

God's wisdom. Tirelessly, he stressed that God dwells in unapproachable light,³¹ that His height is infinite,³² His majesty too high.³³ He repeatedly warned:

Apprenons donc quel moyen nous avons à tenir pour voir Dieu: que ce n'est pas d'y aller avec une hastiveté trop grande: mais qu'il nous faut estre sobres cognoissans la petite mesure de nostre esprit, et la hauteesse infinie de la maiesté de Dieu. Et au reste puis que luy s'est déclaré à nous, selon qu'il savoit nous estre propre et utile pour nostre salut: tenons nous à ceste cognoissance qu'il nous en donne, et n'allons point nous esgarer ne çà, ne là."³⁴

Faith in God was not merely an intellectual issue for Calvin, but also an experiential one:

Car qu'aurons nous gaigné, quand nous aurons cognu subtilement que c'est de l'essence de Dieu et de sa maiesté glorieuse, et cependant que nous ne comprendrons pas ce que nous devons sentir de luy par experience, et ce qu'il nous declare?³⁵

Calvin deemed it impious to try and pierce the veil which God had drawn over His face; to go beyond His revelation. Humans were not to inquiry into God's secrets.³⁶ He repeatedly warned his listeners not to try and overstep the limits that were intrinsic to human nature.

³¹ CO 33, 371: "Il est dit que ses conseils sont un abysme: il est dit, qu'il habite une clarté inaccessible, que nous ne pouvons pas atteindre si haut que de savoir ce qui est en luy."

³² CO 33, 622 : "adorer sa hauteesse qui est infinie."

³³ CO 35, 432 "Et puis quand nous pensons que la majesté de Dieu est encores eslevee par-dessus tous les cieux, d'une si longue distance que nous n'y pouvons point parvenir."

³⁴ CO 35, 245

³⁵ CO 33, 372

³⁶ CO 34, 522: "Et nous voyons que ceux qui n'ont point entendu un seul mot de latin, afin de s'abrutir ainsi parlent latin, *Mitte arcana Dei* c'est à dire, qu'il ne se faut point enquerir des secrets de Dieu."

Si nous la voulons savoir, n'est ce pas comme rompre par force la muraille que Dieu avoit mise? Il nous met la barre pour dire, Vous ne passerez point outre: et si nous le faisons, n'est-ce point despiter Dieu que cela? Ainsi donc, que nous ne prenions point trop de peines pour contenter la folle curiosité de ceux qui s'eslevent ainsi contre Dieu: mais plustost apprenons de les rembarrer à la façon et au stile de saint Paul, Qui es tu homme?³⁷

The revelation of God, far from satisfying futile questions, had the sole purpose of telling humans what they needed to know for salvation, while responding to the anguishing existential problems which stemmed from suffering. Although Calvin did not quote the famous dictum of Melanchthon, “Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere,” this motive is not absent in his theology. Since to know God, was to know the benefits that God granted to human beings, only those who sought those benefits could truly be said to know God. In Sermon 24 he wrote:

Car il est certain que quand Dieu nous met sa parole au devant comme il a esté dit, il regarde à nostre portee qui est bien petite: et cependant il se reserve en son conseil ce que nous ne pouvons encores comprendre, pource qu'il ne seroit pas utile pour nostre salut: non pas que Dieu prene plaisir à nostre ignorance, mais'il cognoist ce qui nous est bon, et il nous faut contenter de la mesure qu'il nous donne, attendans que ce iour soit venu de pleine revelation lors que nous cognoistrions ce qui nous est caché. Pourtant, que maintenant nous profitons

³⁷ CO 33, 590-591

selon qu'il plaira à, Dieu nous le donner, iusques à ce que nous contemplions face à face ce qui nous est aujourd'huy obscur.³⁸

“Calvin,” Charles Partee stressed,

is more concerned with the *knowledge* of God, than the *being* of God. That is, Calvin is not interested in speculations about God in Himself, but in God, as revealed in His word. Calvin is concerned with God-for-us. Thus to know God is to know His relationship to us, as it is revealed and to refuse to search for a hidden God. Of course, God-revealed-in-us implies God-sovereign in Himself, but Calvin rejects the attempts to go behind or above God's revelation.³⁹

There is a kernel of truth in this statement, although Partee's references don't always seem pertinent.⁴⁰ Definitely Calvin went to great lengths to warn believers not to be engaged in vain speculations. In Sermon 57, he sharply criticized the papist theologians, because they wanted to go beyond what God established:

Ils se veulent enquerir de ce que Dieu n'a iamais revelé, et mesmes de ce qu'il nous veut estre caché. Or nous savons quand il n'a point parlé, qu'il veut que nous ayons la bouche close, il ne veut point aussi que nous ayons les oreilles chatouilleuses, pour demander que c'en sera: mais que nous soyons ignorans, quand il ne nous enseigne point. Voila quelle est nostre vraye sagesse, c'est,

³⁸ CO 35, 65-66

³⁹ C. Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 29

⁴⁰ To support his point of view Charles Partee quoted two texts of Calvin's *Institutes*, namely I, 5.1 and I 4. 4 (CO 03, 156, 17f), but unfortunately both references are not relevant. In the first Calvin, far from condemning the search for a hidden God, stressed on the contrary the incomprehensibility of His essence and His hidden majesty. (CO 03, 59-60)

In the second text, the speculations the French Reformer had in mind were related not to the hidden God, but to the time or order in which the Angels were created and in this precise context he invited his readers in reading the Scriptures to direct their inquiries and meditations to those things which tend to edification, not to indulge in curiosity, or in studying things of no use. The French translation sounds : “Nous devons aussi tenir une autre reigle, c'est qu'en lisant l'Ecriture nous cherchions continuellement et meditions ce qui appartient à l'édification, ne laschant point la bride à nostre curiosité, n'a un desir d'apprendre les choses qui ne nous sont point utiles.” CO 03, 195

que nous ne desirions point de plus savoir que ce que Dieu nous monstre en son escole⁴¹

He rejected any theoretical knowledge of God which held no implications for the life of the knower. He asked “What avails it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?”⁴² He asserted that knowledge of God should lead the knower to have fear, and show reverence toward God and to seek every good from God and then, having received, to give credit to God alone.

The notion of “Deus Absconditus” never became an article of faith for Calvin, although he believed it was unavoidable to speak of it. Contrary to Hunter's interpretation,⁴³ that Calvin was fundamentally “an agnostic,” he never slid into agnosticism. He was perfectly aware that only in the most hidden recesses of God's will is it possible to find answers to the many “whys” of human existence. He wrote:

There is in the book of Job, a Divine and remarkable distinction made between that wisdom of God which is unsearchable, and the brightness of which holds all human nature at an immeasurable distance, and that wisdom which is made manifest to us in His revealed and written Law. In the same manner you, if you did not thus confound all things, ought to have made a distinction between that wonderful and profound justice of God, which no human capacity can

⁴¹ CO 33, 709

⁴² ICR I,.2.2. CO 02,35: “Quid denique iuvat Deum cognoscere quocum nihil sit nobis negotii?”

⁴³ “Calvin's doctrine of God is indeed a compound of very definite assertions and a pronounced agnosticism. Occasionally he leaves one with the impression that the God of revelation might turn out to be something quite different from the God of reality. Ultimate inscrutability characterises both His nature and the purposes and principles of His Providence and government” *The Teaching of Calvin: A Modern Interpretation*, 2nd edn., (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1950), p. 48

comprehend, and that rule of justice which God has prescribed for the regulations of the lives of men, in His revealed Law.⁴⁴

However strange it may seem, Calvin's main concern was this notion of the hidden purposes of God at work in the lives of his faithful. He held that the hidden, rather than the revealed God, could give a final and definitive answer to the problem of theodicy. Dekker aptly illustrated this point:

One of the most distinctive features of Calvin's entire pastoral theology is his accent on the hidden in God, and the final mystery of all His dealings with His children. He has no better comfort to offer to troubled spirits than the unrevealed purposes of a God of sovereign grace. The present writer is of the opinion that the incomprehensibility of God, and the final inscrutability to man of all His doings, constitute the leading thought in Calvin's preaching on Job.⁴⁵

In fact, for the most part, the notion of God's hiddenness represents the common denominator of his sermons.⁴⁶ Even when the Reformer seemed concerned with other issues, this theme was always present in the background. This happened not only whenever he tried to explain why the righteous suffered more grievously than the evildoers, but also when he attempted to vindicate God's justice.

⁴⁴ "The Secret Providence of God" in *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 327."Sicuti in libro Iob (28, 27 sq.) distinctio notatu digna statuitur inter sapientiam Dei impervestigabilem, a qua arcetur humanum genus, et eam quae in lege nobis tradita est, sic te quoque, nisi omnia confunderes, potius distinguere oportuerat inter profundam illam iustitiam et admirabilem quae humanis mentibus non capitur, et iustitiae regulam quae regendae hominum vitae in lege praescripta est." CO 09, 310

⁴⁵ H. Dekker, *Sermons from Job*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. xxx

⁴⁶ Thomas Derek wrote: "Thus, in over sixty of the sermons (almost 40%), Calvin directly resorts to an analysis of this issue, sometimes to explain why some suffer more than others, sometimes to defend God's Providence against attack, sometimes to indicate what is at the heart of Christian piety: a submission in quiet, humble reverence to the God whose ways we may not comprehend." *Calvin's Teaching on Job* (London: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), p. 153

6.2 Where the Hiddenness of God can be perceived

Calvin's opposition to rational speculation on the inscrutable essence of God didn't prevent him from trying to understand and deepen the contexts in which the Hiddenness of God could be perceived and assessed.

Among the different criteria that might have been singled out, there were three contexts in which the hiddenness of God becomes particularly evident, that is to say:

- 1) God is hidden in His essence.
- 2) God is hidden in His creation.
- 3) God is hidden in His *modus operandi*.

Let us examine the three contexts in detail. The first form of hiddenness occurred when people were not able to understand effectively who God was in His essence, as Calvin pointed out:

Mais quand il est ici parlé de cognoistre, cela s'entend que nous ne comprenons pas Dieu tel qu'il est en sa maiesté: il s'en faut beaucoup: il suffit bien que nous en ayons quelque petit goust : nous ne sommes point capables de comprendre ceste clarté infinie qui est en luy, il suffit bien que nous en ayons quelques petites estincelles. Voila donc comme Dieu n'est point cognu. Voire d'autant que nostre mesure est trop petite pour le comprendre et l'enclorre: mais tant y a qu'il ne veut point estre caché aux hommes: car il se monstre assez pour estre adoré d'eux.... Car de son essence, elle est invisible, elle nous est cachee.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ CO 35, 304

The expression Calvin used most often to mark the inmost recesses of God was “les secrets de Dieu, que l’homme sensuel ne comprend pas”⁴⁸ “et que les plus ignorans attentent d’enquerir,”⁴⁹ whereas the only proper attitude, would be “reverence et humilité.”⁵⁰ In Sermon 150, the French Reformer wrote:

Le Seigneur nostre Dieu a ses secrets: que nous n'enquerions point de ce que Dieu ne nous a point voulu reveler: contentons nous d'estre ici enseigne par le moyen qu'il a ordonné: et cependant laissons à Dieu ses secrets, n'attentons rien par dessus: glorifions-le, sachans que nous le sommes point encores parvenus à ceste perfection-la de le contempler face à face: mais qu'il faut que nous soyons transfigurez premierement en son image, ce qui ne sera point en perfection, iusques à ce qu'il nous ait despouille de toutes nos imperfections charnelles.⁵¹

This imperative not to climb too high was hammered home often: “Laissons-luy ses secrets, dit-il, c'est à dire, contentons-nous de la doctrine qu'il nous a proposee: que ce soit là nostre mesure, et ne passons point plus outre.”⁵²

Calvin rarely hesitated to make sarcastic remarks about human efforts to cross the border established by God:

Bref, toutes fois et quantes que nous serons chatouillez de ceste curiosité de nous enquerir par trop des choses celestes, et qu'il y aura cependant l'audace meslee parmi pour nous despiter contre Dieu: notons bien qu'il nous faut venir à ceste comparaison, Qui es tu? Et qui est Dieu? C'est ton Createur: et tu

⁴⁸ CO 35, 326 and CO 35, 483

⁴⁹ CO 34, 362

⁵⁰ CO 35, 484

⁵¹ CO 35, 398

⁵² CO 35, 397; CO 35, 398

t'adresses à Lui pour disputer de Ses oeuvres, comme si tu estois son pareil? Et que presumes-tu? As-tu de quoi, que tu entrés ainsi haut, et que tu vueilles tout assuiettir à ton sens? Où en es-tu povre creature?⁵³

For Calvin it was absolutely clear that God couldn't be understood in His deep essence, but only "sous les vertus par lesquelles Il se communiqué a nous."⁵⁴ In Sermon 34, responding to the question "how God does reveal Himself," Calvin answered:

Par ses oeuvres, non point en son essence: car en son essence nous ne le voyons iamais. Or cependant nous le cognoissons d'une telle sorte, que nous sommes contraints de voir que sa main y aura passé. Voila comme un tesmoignage qu'il nous rend de sa presence, Dieu donc passe devant nous, c'est à dire qu'il nous fait sentir sa vertu laquelle s'expand par tout le monde tellement qu'elle nous est prochaine: et toutesfois il est invisible, c'est à dire ceste manifestation-la encores qu'elle soit selon nostre nature, si est-ce que nous n'en avons point de cognoissance pleine: nous ne la pouvons comprendre à cause de la petite capacité de nos esprits, mais demourons là confus.⁵⁵

If the secrets of God were an abyss which it was impossible for human beings to investigate, then the only proper attitude for them was to adore that which they could not understand: "Seigneur, combien que ce soyent des abysmes profonds que tes iugemens, si est-ce que nous ne presumons point de venir au contraire."⁵⁶ In fact,

⁵³ CO 34, 256

⁵⁴ CO 34, 230. See also CO 35, 452

⁵⁵ CO 33, 426

⁵⁶ CO 34, 98

Calvin stated that not only necessity, but also wisdom dictated that one ought not to cross the limits established by God.⁵⁷

The second form of hiddenness occurred when human beings were not able to recognize traces of God, although the universe could be regarded as:

1) A picture, which clearly points out to its creator: “Ce bel ordre que nous voyons entre le iour et la nuit, les estoilles que nous voyons au ciel, et tout le reste, cela nous est comme une peinture vive de la maiesté de Dieu.”⁵⁸

2) A theatre:

Il est vray que desia quand nous voyons l'ordre de nature tel que Dieu l'a constitué, nous le devons bien glorifier. Et de fait Dieu nous a mis en ce monde, afin que nous soyons comme en un grand theatre pour contempler ses oeuvres, pour confesser qu'il se monstre et sage, et iuste, et puissant, voire d'une façon admirable.⁵⁹

3) A mirror:

C'est pour le moins, qu'estans en ce monde nous ayons les yeux ouverts pour considerer les oeuvres de Dieu qui sont et prochaines de nous, et faciles à voir, encores que nous ne soyons point gens lettrez ni subtils: car les plus idiots apperçoivent l'ordre de nature estre tel, que là. ils voyent la maiesté de Dieu comme en un miroir.⁶⁰

4) A book written in big letters: “Il est vray que c'est desia une brutalité trop grande à nous, que le ciel et la terre, et tout l'ordre de nature ne nous suffise

⁵⁷ CO 33, 241 “Nostre vraye sagesse est d'ignorer ce que Dieu nous veut estre caché.”

⁵⁸ CO 33, 570

⁵⁹ CO 33, 539

⁶⁰ CO 35, 315. In the *Institutes* the universe was defined as a “speculum.” CO 2, 49

point pour nous monstrier que c'est de Dieu. Car voila un livre escrit en assez grosses lettres.”⁶¹

Although nature indisputably points to the presence of God, the human reaction was quite often marked by hebetudes,⁶² stupidity,⁶³ roughness,⁶⁴ deafness and blindness.⁶⁵

In Sermon 148, commenting the verse of Job 38:6, the French Reformer employed poetical expressions in order to better illustrate the effects of human deafness:

⁶¹ CO 33, 428. In the *Institutes* the universe was also defined as a “spectaculum.” CO 2, 45

⁶² “Qui est donc cause que nous sommes ainsi abrutis, et que nous ne cognoissons pas ce qui est de Dieu? Et c'est d'autant que nous ne regardons pas à ce qui nous est tout visible et patent. Chacun dira pour s'excuser, O ie ne suis point clerc, ie n'ay point esté en l'escole. Ouy bien: mais il faudroit apprendre seulement des bestes brutes: la terre qui ne parlepoint, les poissons qui sont muets, ceux-la nous pourront enseigner de Dieu: non pas tout ce qui en est, mais pour en donner quelque intelligence. Or est-il ainsi que nous sommes du tout hebetez: il faut donc conclure qu'il ne tient qu'à nostre ingratitude, et que nous ne dâignons pas ouvrir les yeux pour contempler ce que Dieu nous monstre. Voici un passage qui est bien digne d'estre observé.” CO, 33, 570. See also: CO 33, 211, 285, 394, 415, 428, 715, CO 34, 145, CO 35, 311-312, 329, 334, 485.

⁶³ CO 35, 429: “Car nous sommes hardis, voire pour nous despiter contre Dieu, quand sa gloire ne nous est point connue. Et c'est nostre stupidité, qui nous donne une telle audace, car d'autant que nous mettons un voile devant nos yeux, qui nous empesche de contempler la gloire de Dieu, chacun s'abrutist ainsi. Voila pourquoi nous sommes orgueilleux: car si nous apprehendions que c'est de Dieu, il est certain que nous serions tous abbatus, qu'on ne verroit plus ni orgueil ni outrecuidance aux hommes.”

CO 35, 461. “Or si nous estions bien sages, il ne faudroit point sortir hors de nous pour contempler la maïesté de Dieu: mais il faut que les hommes soyent renvoyez aux bestes à cause de leur ingratitude, quand ils ne cognoissent point Dieu selon qu'il se declare en eux.” See also CO 33, 64, CO 33, 571, CO 33, 594, CO 34, 94, CO 34, 202, CO 35, 177, CO 35, 198, CO 35, 201, CO 35, 288, CO 35, 391

⁶⁴ CO 35, 396. “Quand nous voyons une telle chose, d'autant plus que Dieu se declare privéement à nous, nous avons iuste raison de le glorifier: et ne le faisons pas, nous ne saurions excuser nostre ingratitude en façon que ce soit. N'est-ce pas grand' chose que nous voyons à l'oeil les miracles de Dieu (il «nous les monstre au doigt: c'est une chose qui ne se voit point seulement une fois en la vie, mais tous les iours il recommence) et cependant nous n'y pensons point droitement? Nous foulons l'herbe au pie: et nous ne daignons pas ietter l'oeil iusques là pour dire, Benit soit Dieu qui fait ainsi fructifier la terre. Au reste que nous avisions quant et quant à nostre rudesse et stupidité.”

⁶⁵ CO 35, 379-380. “Nous voyons que le soleil ne sort iamais de son chemin, tellement que quand tout cela sera bien marqué, on trouvera qu'en tous les iours de l'année il y a diversité:....: et neantmoins quand l'ordre est ainsi gardé, et n'est-ce point une chose qui nous doit ravir en estonnement, pour nous faire adorer la maïesté incomprehensible de nostre Dieu? Ouy, si nous n'estions pires que bestes brutes. Nous avons les yeux, et nous n'en voyons goutte: Dieu fait resonner ses creatures muettes, d'autant que sa gloire est là imprimée: mais nous n'oyons rien de ceste melodie-là.”

Par ces mots Dieu signifie, que si tost que les estoilles ont esté faites, ç'a esté comme un chant ordonné, et une melodie pour le glorifier. Non pas que les estoilles chantent, non pas aussi qu'elles soyent creatures sensibles : mais pource que Dieu y a manifesté sa grandeur, sa bonté, sa vertu, et sagesse, c'est autant comme s'il parloit haut et clair. Dressons-nous donc les yeux au ciel? Nous devons ouir la melodie des estoilles, comme elles ont commencé de chanter dès leur creation: et il est certain qu'une telle melodie nous devoit bien resveiller pour nous solliciter à chanter les louanges du Seigneur, et à le glorifier. Ouy, si nous n'estions plus que sourds, il nous faudroit bien recevoir, et prester l'aureille de nostre coeur à tels chants, et si melodieux : car voila mesmes les Anges de paradis qui sont incitez à ce faire. Mais nous sommes par trop stupides en cest endroit, tellement qu'en levant les yeux au ciel pour contempler les estoilles, nous ne regardons point dequoy elles nous doivent servir.⁶⁶

These words ought not to be interpreted as expression of sentimentalism, since no one was less sentimental than Calvin. Rather these words find their justification in the widest context of Calvin's general perspective: God had revealed Himself not only in the person of Jesus Christ, but also in human nature and in the universe. Although such knowledge of God in itself didn't bring about salvation, it rendered human beings completely inexcusable.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ CO 35, 369

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. XIX, p. 19. "Faith is not conceived by the bare observation of heaven and earth, but by the hearing of the word. It follows from this that men cannot be brought to the saving knowledge of God except by the direction of the word. Yet this does not prevent them being rendered inexcusable even without the word, for, even if they are naturally deprived of light, they are nevertheless blind through their own malice." CO 48, 327-8: "Atqui fides non ex nudo et coeli et terrae intuitu concipitur, sed ex verbi auditu. Unde sequitur, non posse, nisi verbi directione ad salvificam Dei notitiam homines adduci. Neque tamen hoc obstat, quo minus etiam absque verbo

The third form of hiddenness occurred when God's justice was openly contradicted by the seemingly confused experiences of history, by the success,⁶⁸ triumph,⁶⁹ and impunity of the wicked;⁷⁰ by the scandals of the persistent existence of evil,⁷¹ and injustice;⁷² by the fact that God acted as if nothing has happened,⁷³ by God's testing the patience of believers,⁷⁴ by the suffering and the anguish of the church.⁷⁵ It was especially in reference to this last example of suffering that Calvin's prose was profoundly revealing. In the text of Job 4:10-18, it is possible to recognize Calvin's own voice, when he reported the cries of those who, persecuted and oppressed, asked to be vindicated:

Nous sommes confus quand nous voyons l'estat du monde. Pourquoi? Si
c'estoit à, nous, il n'y auroit celui qui ne voulust disposer les choses tout

reddantur inexcusabiles, qui tametsi naturaliter luce privati, propria tamen malitia caecutiunt, quemadmodum docet Paulus primo ad Rom. Capite."

⁶⁸ CO 34, 263: "En somme quand nous voyons ici les meschans estre à leur aise et en prosperité, et qu'ils font leurs triomphes: il est vray qu'il ne se peut faire que nous ne soyons tentez, et n'ayons quelque pointe là dedans: Et comment? Qu'est-ce que ceci veut dire, que Dieu soit là au ciel oisif, qu'il semble qu'il dorme, qu'il ne prouvoye point aux choses d'ici bas?"

⁶⁹ CO 34, 147: "S'il advient que les meschans soyent eslevez, mesmes qu'ils dressent la teste iusques aux nues, sachons qu'il ne faut point que nous soyons troublez pour cela, comme si Dieu estoit endormi, comme s'il ne regardoit plus au monde, et qu'il n'en eust plus de soin."

⁷⁰ CO 34, 221: "Quand donc nous ne voyons point que nostre Seigneur reprime les meschans, et qu'il les corrige s'ils ont failli, ni aussi à l'opposite qu'il donne secours aux bons: il est vrai que ceci nous pourroit bien fascher: car nous ourrions concevoir quelque chagrin et ennui en nous, pour demander à Dieu pourquoy c'est qu'il dissimule (car il semble qu'il soit endormi) mais si est-ce qu'il ne faut point ue nous soyons si hastifs ne si bouillans." See also CO 34, 347 and CO 34, 394

⁷¹ CO 34, 369: "Vray est que Iob en a tenu icy devant long propos: mais nous savons que c'est un tel scandale, et si grand, que nous en sommes troublez à chacune fois: ie di, les plus parfaits. Si le mal continue, et que Dieu n'y mette point de remede, chacun se tormenté, et dispute-on, comment il est possible que Dieu soit si patient, et comme il dissimule tant, et qu'il semble qu'il soit comme endormi quand il permet ainsi tout."

⁷² CO 33, 281: "S'il (Dieu) dissimule, et qu'il attende les pecheurs en patience, il nous semble qu'il soit endormi, et ne gouverne plus le monde, qu'il laisse aller les choses sans qu'il y vueille remedier."

⁷³ CO 33, 488: "Nous voyons que nostre esprit nous pousse à cela, que si les choses ne viennent à nostre phantasie, il nous semble que tout se tourne par fortune, et que Dieu ne regarde plus en ce monde, ou bien que Dieu ne face point son office, ou qu'il soit comme endormi, ou qu'il ne luy chaille ne de bien ne de mal."

⁷⁴ CO 34, 381: "Il est vrai qu'il cognoist tout: mais cependant il se cache, c'est à dire, il ne monstre pas qu'il vueille avoir le soin de ceux qui sont affligez pour les secourir: car il esprouve leur patience pour un temps."

⁷⁵ CO 35, 142

autrement Nous voyons ici le contraire, quand notamment Iob dit, que les hommes crient de la cité: comme s'il disoit, Je ne parlerai point des fautes qui sont incognuës (car il se pourra commettre beaucoup de fraudes et de violences en cachette) mais on voit les iniures toutes notoires, cela est connu par toute une ville, les ruës en seront pleines, chacun en saura parler: et ceux qui sont ainsi affligés crient, tellement qu'il a beaucoup de tesmoins de l'iniure qui est faite, voila la nécessité mesmes qui est si extreme, qu'on voit qu'il est temps de les secourir ou iamais, car ils sont comme au bout de leurs sens: et cependant Dieu ne fait pas semblant de les vouloir aider: il semble qu'ils ayent crié en vain, et que c'est temps perdu que les hommes ayent eu leur recours à Dieu. Quand on voit cela, que dira-on? sinon que Dieu ne besongne point à nostre guise, et qu'il faut que tous nos sens soyent là comme esblouys?⁷⁶

Calvin was absolutely clear that the divine “modus operandi” was in itself incomprehensible, independently of our ontological roughness and dullness.⁷⁷

Car Dieu n'a point une raison presente tousiours en ses oeuvres, pour dire que les hommes l'apperçoivent: et puis ceste sagesse se nomme si profonde que c'est un abysme.⁷⁸

The French Reformer's contemplation of the notion of divine concealment which was recorded in some of Calvin's autobiographical confessions conveyed a deep sense of agitation: “Pour exemple, si nous sommes en guerre, ou que nous

⁷⁶ CO 34, 383

⁷⁷ CO 35, 396

⁷⁸ CO 33, 242

soyons tormentez de famine ou de peste: nous voila comme en la nuict, le visage de Dieu nous est caché, nous ne savons de quel costé nous tourner.”⁷⁹

From still other sermons there emerges a deep sense of despair:

C'est le regard de Dieu: comme à l'opposite quand il nous tourne le dos, quand il se cache de nous, il faut que nous soyons comme perdus et desesperez: car il n'y a rien où l'homme puisse se reposer, sinon quand il cognoist que Dieu a le soin de lui. Cependant donc que Dieu daigne avoir l'oeil sur nous, il y a de quoi nous esiouyr, nous sommes asseurez qu'il nous maintiendra, et qu'il ne nous faut rien craindre : mais si Dieu nous met en oubli, nous sommes estonnez, et non sans cause: car nous sommes comme exposez en proye à Satan, cent mille morts nous environnent, et n'y a point de remede.⁸⁰

These statements ought not to be overlooked. During Calvin's time the hiddenness of God was perceived more intensely and tragically than today, since it involved the disintegration of all the values that informed Christian society. Today, as we experience an ongoing process of secularization, men are less sensible, and are used to living “etsi Deus non daretur.”

It was within this context of disintegration that Calvin carefully emphasized the deep sense of uncertainty which stemmed from the acknowledgement that the world was engulfed by a flood of iniquity. Whenever injustice seems to reign, and we

⁷⁹ CO 34, 540

⁸⁰ CO 35, 455

can not perceive His protection, God is perceived as hidden.⁸¹ Then we fall into the temptation of thinking that He has forgotten us.⁸²

Quand l'Ecriture nous parle de son election, qu'il choisit ceux que bon lui semble, qu'il reiette aussi les autres, qu'il dispose du genre humain à son plaisir: aussi quand il afflige les bons et les laisse là opprimez, que nous voyons les choses tant confuses au monde, là Dieu se cache, c'est à dire, qu'il ne se monstre pas à nous en telle façon, que selon nostre sens nous puissions apprehender sa iustice, sa bonté, et vertu, et sagesse: et toutesfois si faut-il que nous lui rendions la gloire qui lui est due.⁸³

Vice versa, when “Dieu nous fait la grace de contempler qu'il gouverne tout, et que nous voyons un bel ordre et bien disposé, alors c'est comme si sa face luisoit sur nous comme un soleil.”⁸⁴

6.3 Causes resulting in the Hiddenness of God

Analyzing the contexts in which the hiddenness of God is perceived, Calvin was compelled to examine its causes more deeply. He maintained that the incomprehensibility of God and the fact that He remains, despite all our efforts to penetrate His mystery, a “Deus Absconditus,” are caused by:

- 1) Humanity's ontological limitation.

⁸¹ CO 33, 740: “Au reste cognoissons si quelquesfois Dieu nous fasse, et qu'il se retire, et qu'il se cache tellement que nous n'appercevions point son secours, et que nous ne puissions point estre asseurez de sa protection.”

⁸² CO 35, 458: “Il nous semble bien, que Dieu nous ait oubliez, quand nous sommes en quelque danger, et mesmes que nous sentons les coups, bref, que nous voyons la mort presente: et que cependant nous ne voyons point que Dieu nous vueille tendre la main: nous crions alors, Helas! Seigneur, où et-tu? comment m'as-tu oublié?”

⁸³ CO 33, 463

⁸⁴ CO 35, 193

2) The restriction of God's revelation.

3) The active concealment of God.

Whereas the first aspect of God's hiddenness depends upon human beings and their limitations, the second and third aspects of God's hiddenness have to do with the fact that God decides to hide Himself from us.⁸⁵

Since each cause requires a distinct approach, let us start with the first aspect of Hiddenness which depends upon our ontological limitation. It is worth noting that the starting point of Calvin's reflections on this theme was not represented by vague speculations about God's essence, but by a simple acknowledgment of the incapacity of human mind to comprehend divine justice.

Susan Schreiner has hit the mark when she writes:

Central to [Calvin's] exegesis is the recognition of the noetic or perceptual limitations of the human mind trapped in the disorder of human history.

Calvin's constant concern with the failure of the mind to know God, which dominates the first book of the Institutes, permeates his *Sermons on Job*.

Confronted with the disorder of history, the mind's eye squints and strains to see divine justice but cannot penetrate or transcend the present confusion which hides providence from its limited and fallen view. Calvin finds the heuristic key to the book of Job in 1 Corinthians 13:12 ['Now we see in a mirror, dimly']. He repeatedly cites this verse to describe the difficulty of

⁸⁵ Hermann Selderhuis recently singled out another similar criterion that can be summed up as follows: "First of all, God is hidden in part because we as human beings simply cannot know God exhaustively. Here the hiddenness is connected with our humanity. Secondly, we also obscure God through our sins, creating a kind of smoke screen between him and ourselves. Here the Hiddenness of God is due to our being sinners. Lastly, and most importantly, God's Hiddenness is the result when God deliberately conceals Himself from us. Here hiddenness originates in God's being God." *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 180

perceiving providence in the midst of history. Caught within the turmoil of earthly events, the believer now sees God's providence only as through a mirror dimly.⁸⁶

As a matter of fact, the theme of human ontological limitation represents the common denominator of Calvin's preaching:

C'est donc l'office de Dieu de nous donner à cognoistre ce quil fait, et comment, et pourquoy: et cependant nous avons à nous contenter de ce que l'Ecriture prononce. Et encores que cela nous semble estrange, et que nous ne le puissions comprendre selon nostre capacité, et nostre raison, si faut-il que nous confessions que Dieu est iuste : et combien que nous ne le comprenions pas, attendons que ce dernier iour soit venu, auquel nous ne cognoistrions plus en partie,ne comme en obscurité (ainsi que dit saint Paul 1. Cor. 13, 9. sv.) mais nous contemplerons face à face ce qui nous est maintenant monsté comme en un miroir.⁸⁷

Herein lies one of the most important motives underlying Calvin's theology. Any knowledge of God that humans could attain was necessarily partial and fragmentary. Instead of being knowable, God remained hidden, concealed, and incomprehensible. The metaphor of the mirror strengthens this notion. The smooth glass mirror we have today was unknown in Calvin's time. Mirrors were of hammered metal and since the smoothness was irregular, the image that appeared in the mirror had only a vague resemblance to reality. So the mirror was, in Calvin's opinion, a perfect metaphor for the human's limited perception of God.

⁸⁶S. Schreiner, "Through a Mirror Dimly, Calvin's Sermons on Job," *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986), pp. 175-193

⁸⁷CO 33, 105

Employing various expressions and with different emphases Calvin relentlessly underscored human beings' limitations in knowledge and insight. Before God “nous sommes icy parmi les bestes brutes, parmi les vermines, parmi les choses qui sont si basses, et si pesantes, qu'il semble qu'il y ait une distance infinie entre nous et le ciel,”⁸⁸ “rudes et grossiers,”⁸⁹ “ignorans et idiots,”⁹⁰ “trop infirmes,”⁹¹ “caduques et fragiles,”⁹² “povres aveugles,”⁹³ “trop rudes et trop pesans, pour monter si haut.”⁹⁴ “Nous sommes seulement soixante ou quatre vingts ans en ce monde, ie parle des plus vieux: et quelle donc peut ester nostre intelligence?”⁹⁵ he asked himself.

For Calvin it was clear that this ontological limitation was a consequence of the Fall. Contrary to the opinion shared by W. Bouwsma, he didn't consider human creatureliness in itself guilty,⁹⁶ or creaturehood as the trouble.⁹⁷ Dissociating himself from any form of dualism, the French Reformer firmly denied “que la substance (comme on appelle) de nos corps, et de nos ames soit une chose mauvaise, car nous sommes creatures de Dieu”⁹⁸ and attributed their situation to the dreadful consequences of original sin. Before the fall, obviously, Adam's situation was absolutely different. He was created to be immortal and therefore was not subject to death:

⁸⁸ CO 34, 520

⁸⁹ CO 33, 57

⁹⁰ CO 33, 722

⁹¹ CO 34, 442

⁹² CO 35, 47

⁹³ CO 33, 290

⁹⁴ CO 35, 262

⁹⁵ CO 35, 203

⁹⁶ “He (Calvin) saw guilt in creatureliness itself, guilt shared even by human beings created in God's image before the Fall, guilt towards the Father even on the part of his good children, guilt in existing.” W. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: a Sixteenth Century Portrait*, p. 42

⁹⁷ S. Selinger, *Calvin against Himself: An Inquiry in intellectual History* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1984), 68

⁹⁸ CO 33, 728

Voila pourquoy en parlant de la mort, il n'y sent que toute confusion. Et comment? La mort est pour renverser l'ordre de Dieu, comme le peché l'avoit renversé. Quand Dieu a créé l'homme, ce n'a pas esté à ceste condition, qu'il fust mortel. Il est vray que nous n'eussions pas tousiours vescu en ce monde en l'estat auquel estoit Adam. Car Dieu nous eust changez en immortalité glorieuse. Mais tant y a qu'il ne nous eust point fallu estre mortels, il n'eust point fallu que ce qui est mortel en nous eust esté renouvelé. La condition d'Adam estoit telle, qu'ayant vescu au monde, il avoit son heritage eternel avec Dieu.⁹⁹

Before the fall, Adam was also free from suffering and from the limitations that mark our present condition:

Il est vray qu'il ne nous faut point attribuer à Dieu le mal qui est en nous : car Adam n'a pas esté créé en la corruption de laquelle il est ici parlé, il se l'est acquise de soy: car les choses que Dieu a faites il les- a trouvees bonnes. L'homme donc qui est excellent par dessus toutes creatures n'estoit pas ainsi perverti, iusques à ce qu'il se soit aliené de Dieu: mais quand il s'est separé de la fontaine de iustice, que lui a-il peu rester, sinon toute iniquité et corruption? Ainsi nous voyons d'où procede tout nostre mal, et qu'il ne faut point que nous imputions à Dieu les vices ausquels nous sommes suiets, et sous lesquels nous sommes tenus captifs.¹⁰⁰

Original sin, as a consequence of Adam's action, created an insurmountable barrier between God and man.

⁹⁹ CO 33, 515

¹⁰⁰ CO 33, 730

Or il est vrai que (comme i'ai dit) toute la clarté que nous avons de nature est convertie en tenebres, à cause du peché et de la corruption que nous tirons de nostre pere Adam : mais ce qui est de mal et de vicieux il nous le faut imputer à nostre faute: comme aussi cela n'est point de la nature que nous avons de Dieu. Nons ne pouvons point dire que cela vienne de la premiere creation quand nous sommes tant enclins à errer, que nostre esprit est enserré en toute ignorance, que nous ne pouvons aller qu'en confusion quand nous croyons nostre esprit: il ne faut point, di-ie, que nous imputions cela à Dieu: car il nous avoit creez à son image, et ceste image là a esté corrompue par le peché d'Adam.¹⁰¹

In order to emphasize the infinite distance between God and His creatures, Calvin often resorted to the image of the sun and asked: “Si nous ne pouvons regarder le soleil, que nos yeux n'en soyent esblouys, ie vous prie comment contemplerons nous la gloire de Dieu en sa perfection?”¹⁰²

Being perfectly aware that ontological limitation was not the only grounds for God's hiddenness, Calvin singled out another and more meaningful cause, that is, God's hiddenness depended upon God's decision to fix a limit to His revelation: “Or il nous faut observer, que Dieu se manifestant à nous en partie, ne veut point faire que nous ne soyons enseignez de ce qui nous est bon et proper.”¹⁰³ In Calvin's opinion God's revelation had been partial from two points of view: the quantitative and qualitative. From the quantitative point of view, the revelation of God didn't exhaust God's true ontological nature. In fact, as he wrote in the last version of *The Institutes*,

¹⁰¹ CO 35, 238

¹⁰² CO 33, 111

¹⁰³ CO 34, 508

the Scriptures didn't describe God in regards to His inner life (*non quis sit apud se*) but as He revealed Himself to humanity (“*sed qualis erga nos*”).¹⁰⁴ Humans will never know God as He is,¹⁰⁵ but will know Him only if God decides to manifest Himself and tell them what is useful for salvation.¹⁰⁶

God is invisible in Himself and in His essence.¹⁰⁷ In order to explain in what sense God is invisible, Calvin used the image of a palace:

Il habite en son palais. Voulons-nous donc approcher de luy? Le voulons nous cognoistre selon que nostre capacité le porte? Venons à ce palais: et n'y entrons pas d'une audace furieuse pour comprendre tous les secrets de Dieu: car s'il habite en un palais, il faut bien qu'il ait autant de puissance pour le moins, qu'auroit un roy du monde, qui n'est qu'une creature caduque. Ainsi donc contentons nous de voir ce palais de Dieu si excellent, pour adorer sa maiesté: et s'il luy plaist d'approcher de nous, il faut bien que nous venions au devant de luy avec toute reverence, et que nous ne passions point nostre mesure.¹⁰⁸

Consequently, God's indescribable and impenetrable essence must be distinguished from that aspect of God by which He revealed Himself through His works and attributes. Perhaps the best example of Calvin's opinion regarding this can be found

¹⁰⁴ CO 02, 73: “Ubi animadvertamus eius aeternitatem, magnifico illo nomine bis repetito, praedicari; deinde ommemorari eius virtutes, quibus nobis describitur non quis sit apud se, sed qfualis erga nos; ut ista eius agnitio vivo magis sensu, quam vacua et meteorica speculatione constet.”

CO 03, 115: “En apres que ses vertus nous sont racontées par lesquelles il nous est démontré non pas quel il est en soy mesme, mais tel qu'il est envers nous: tellement que ceste cognoissance consiste plus en vive experience, qu'en vaine speculation.”

¹⁰⁵ CO 35, 452: “Voila donc Dieu qui nous est incognu en soy.”

¹⁰⁶ CO 33, 57: “Nous ne cognoistrions Dieu tel qu'il est, mais nous le cognoistrions en telle mesure qu'il lui plaira de se manifester à nous, c'est à dire, selon qu'il cognoist qu'il nous est utile pour nostre salut.”

¹⁰⁷ CO 33, 570: “Comme saint Paul aussi en parle au premier chapitre des Romains (v. 20), ... Dieu (est) invisible en soy et en son essence.”

¹⁰⁸ CO 35, 309

in his *Commentary on the Letter to Romans* when he wrote: “No idea can be formed of God without including his eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy.”¹⁰⁹ Humans know only in part. Calvin made this point particularly clear in Sermon 34, whilst commenting the text of Job 9:11-12:¹¹⁰

En quoy il nous signifie qu'encores que Dieu se monstre à nous, si sera-il invisible: comment est-ce que Dieu se monstre? Par ses oeuvres, non point en son essence: car en son essence nous ne le voyons iamais. Or cependant nous le cognoissons d'une telle sorte, que nous sommes contrains de voir que sa main y aura passé. Voila comme un tesmoignage qu'il nous rend de sa presence, Dieu donc passe devant nous, c'est à dire qu'il nous fait sentir sa vertu laquelle s'espand par tout le monde tellement qu'elle nous est prochaine: et toutesfois il est invisible, c'est à dire ceste manifestation-la encores qu'elle soit selon nostre nature, si est-ce que nous n'en avons point de cognoissance pleine.¹¹¹

This distinction between God Himself and the God of revelation has made some people question whether Calvin assigned God two wills. “Does the electing, inscrutable will of God override and thus undermine God’s revelation in Christ?” asked C. J. Kinlaw.¹¹² But according to Calvin, God’s will was one and simple. The

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the apostle to the Romans*, Vol. XIX, p. 71. CO 49:24: “Concipi Deus non potest sine sua aeternitate, potentia, sapientia, bonitate, veritate, iustitia, misericordia.” “Nous cognoissons en partie.” CO 33, 201, CO 34, 348, CO 35, 192

CO 33, 426. See also CO 35, 34: “Car de son essence, elle est invisible, elle nous est cachee: mais il deploye ses vertus en telle sorte qu'encores que nous fussions aveugles, si est-ce que nous y pouvons taster, comme aussi saint Paul use de ceste similitude au dixseptieme des Actes (v. 27).”

¹¹⁰ “If He goes by me, I do not see Him; If He moves past, I do not perceive Him; If He takes away, who can hinder Him? Who can say to Him What are You doing?”

¹¹¹ CO 33, 426

¹¹² C.J.Kinlaw, “Determinism and the Hiddenness of God in Calvin's Theology,” *Religious Studies* 24.4 (1988) pp. 497-510

inscrutability of God's will was a result of our natural "imbecillitas" as he made clear in his last version of *The Institutes*:

Still, however, the will of God is not at variance with itself. It undergoes no change. He makes no pretence of not willing what he wills, but while in himself the will is one and undivided, to us it appears manifold, because, from the feebleness of our intellect, we cannot comprehend how, though after a different manner, he wills and wills not the very same thing.¹¹³

Since God was "totaliter aliter" (wholly other), it was utterly impossible to confine Him within the narrow boundaries of His revelation. Keeping in mind Calvin's concern for emphasizing the mystery and transcendence of God, one then understands his adamant refusal to localize God's presence,¹¹⁴ as it is clear from Sermon 85:

Quand donc nous venons à concevoir ceste maiesté incomprehensible qui est en Dieu, ceste hautesse inestimable:il faut que nous soyons estonnez pour nous humilier, et n'estre plus ainsi eslevez comme nous estions. Voila l'intention d'Eliphas. Dieu (dit-il) n'est-il point là haut au ciel? Pourquoi est-ce qu'il parle ainsi du siege de Dieu, sinon pour le discerner d'avec les creatures, et les choses de ce monde? Vrai est que Dieu (comme il est d'une essence infinie) n'est pas enclos au ciel, sa maiesté est par tout expandue, il remplit aussi bien la terre (comme il est déclaré). Les cieux ne te comprennent point, (disoit Salomon en dediant le temple) et Dieu lui mesme en son Prophete Isaie dit (66,

¹¹³ *ICR* I, 18. 2. CO 02, 171. "Neque tamen ideo vel secum pugnat, vel mutatur Dei voluntas, vel quod vult se nolle simulat; sed quum una etsi simplex in ipso sit, nobis multiplex apparet: quia promentis nostrae imbecillitate, quomodo idem diversomodo nolit fieri et velit, non capimus."

¹¹⁴ R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Creation et la Providence dans la Predication de Calvin*, p. 111, used the word "despatialise" to define Calvin's emphasis on the infinity of God.

1), Le ciel est mon throne royal, et la terre est mon marchepied. Dieu donc n'est point enclos au ciel: mais ce n'est pas sans cause toutes fois que l'Ecriture en parle ainsi.¹¹⁵

Convinced that the biblical God defies definition, the French Reformer stressed that God's revelation was not exhaustive even from the qualitative point of view, since God decided to accommodate Himself to humanity's finite and sin-blurred perceptions. The principle of divine accomodation, as the German theologian Otto Weber pointed out, became one of the most important elements of Calvin's theological work:

Jamais personne n'a autant mis l'accent sur le principe d'accommodation que Calvin. Il n'est pas exagéré de dire que sa conception de la Révélation est déterminée par son idée d'accommodation, qui est en même temps un motif directeur de son exégèse.¹¹⁶

The starting point for the concept of divine accommodation lay in God's transcendence. Since human reason was unable to “enclore la puissance et iustice et sagesse de Dieu en l'estat present du monde tel comme il se peut appercevoir,”¹¹⁷ God adapted Himself to human measure and understanding:

Or il nous faut observer, que Dieu se manifestant à nous en partie, ne veut point faire que nous ne soyons enseignez de ce qui nous est bon et propre: mais si est-ce qu'il cognoist nostre capacité: Dieu donc nous revele sa volonté selon

¹¹⁵ CO 34, 294

¹¹⁶ O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) vol. 1, 415, note 52

¹¹⁷ CO 34, 480

nostre portee: cependant il se reserve à soi ce que nous ne comprendrions pas, pource qu'il surmonte nostre entendement.¹¹⁸

In accommodating humanity, God employed two different approaches. The first was that of a “babysitter.” In talking to us “Dieu s'accommode là à nostre rudesse, il parle familièrement avec nous: mesmes il beguaye (par maniere de dire) comme feroit une nourrisse avec ses petis enfans.”¹¹⁹ The second was that of a mother: “Y a-il rien qui nous doive plus inciter à aimer nostre Dieu, que quand nous cognoissons qu'il descend ainsi à nous, et qu'il nous appastelle (par maniere de dire) tout ainsi qu'une mere ses enfans.”¹²⁰ David Whright highlighted the fact that, “the revealed God is always still for Calvin the partly hidden God... We must make do with the prattling of God until hereafter he speaks to us face to face.”¹²¹ Revelation was not only an adjustment God made to accommodate the capacities of human mind and heart, but involved also, as Richard Stauffer recognized, “une transfiguration et même une espèce de denaturation.”¹²² This is particularly clear in Sermon 141, where Calvin’s perspective seems to parallel Luther’s insights concerning “revelatio sub contraria specie:

Il est vrai que l'Escriture prononce, que le naturel de Dieu est d'estre benin, d'estre patient et amiable, de supporter les infirmes, d'user de misericorde encores qu'on l'ait offensé. Puis qu'ainsi est, quand il nous chastie, et qu'il se monstre dur et aspre, il est certain qu'il se transfigure, par maniere de dire, qu'il

¹¹⁸ CO 35, 62

¹¹⁹ CO 35, 398. I owe this quotation to R. Stauffer in *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 55

¹²⁰ CO 33, 361. I owe this quotation to R. Stauffer in *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 55

¹²¹ D. Whright, “Calvin’s Pentatheucal Criticism: Equity, Hardness of Heart, and Divine Accommodation in the Mosaic Harmony Commentary.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 33-50. I owe this quotation to R. Ward Holder, *John Calvin and the grounding of Interpretation* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 48

¹²² R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 22

ne suit point son naturel: mais il faut qu'il use d'une telle rudesse à cause de nostre malice, pource que nous sommes bestes sauvages, que nous sommes tellement desbordez, que quand il nous veut recueillir à soi.¹²³

God condescended to human rudeness.¹²⁴ Calvin insisted on the general incapacity of human mind to attain the absolute, utilising the traditional formula: “finitum non est capax infiniti.” Taking a cue from the text of *Job*, the French Reformer stated that “Dieu ne se monstre pas tel, qu'il est en son essence infinie (car nous en serions engloutis) mais qu'il se monstre tel que nous le concevions, et tel que nous le pouvons porter.”¹²⁵

Parallel to this accentuation of the partial and accommodating character of divine revelation, Calvin directed attention to another and more mysterious hiddenness, namely, that which resulted solely from decision of God who, in fact, desired a secret dominion.

Dieu se reserve tousiours (comme il a esté dit) quelque partie à soy: voire tellement qu'il a les causes occultes et cachees en son conseil, ausquelles il ne nous faut point maintenant presumer d'entrer. Et c'est une belle doctrine de savoir ainsi discerner entre ce que Dieu nous revele, et ce qu'il retient vers soy, comme aussi Moyse en parle. Pourquoi ? Car nostre Seigneur a ses secrets.¹²⁶

¹²³ CO 35, 286

¹²⁴ CO 33, 57 “Pour exprimer cela, l'écriture use d'une façon qui est convenable à nostre rudesse, car nous sommes tant infirmes, que nous ne comprendrons jamais la maiesté de Dieu ainsi haute qu'elle est, nous ne pourrons point parvenir iusques là. Il faut donc que Dieu descende pour estre compris de nous, c'est à dire, qu'il ne se monstre point selon sa gloire, qui est infinie, mais selon qu'il voit quel est nostre sens, qu'il s'y accommode.”

¹²⁵ CO 33, 111

¹²⁶ CO 35, 397-398

Calvin used various expressions to emphasize this activity of divine concealment:

“Dieu se cache,”¹²⁷ “Dieu cache sa face,”¹²⁸ “son visage,”¹²⁹ “Dieu nous tourne le dos,”¹³⁰ “cache ses secrets aux sages du monde et aux grands, et les revele aux petis,”¹³¹ “son visage nous est obscur, et que nous ne le pouvons pas contempler.”¹³²

Another expression Calvin used to express God’s concealment was that one of the “seeming sleep of God,” “comme si il avoit quitté son office.”¹³³ Maybe the best expression of God’s concealment was Calvin’s image of the sun, which became a metaphor of the deep contradiction that characterized his time. This part of Sermon 79 is worth quoting in its entirety:

Comme quand le temps est troublé, nous ne verrons point le soleil: mais nous ne sommes pas si despourvus de sens, que nous ne sachions bien que le soleil luit tousiours par-dessus les nues. Si on demandoit à un petit enfant, Où est le soleil? Il n’y en a plus, diroit-il: car il n’est pas instruit iusques là, de savoir que la clarté que nous avons vient du soleil, quelque empeschement qu’il y ait entre deux. Or nous qui avons par usage cela tout resolu, que le soleil fait son circuit ordinaire, quand il est levé, encores qu’il y ait des nues qui nous empeschent de le voir, nous ne laissons pas de dire, Le soleil luit, mais le temps n’est pas clair ne serain que nous appercevions ce qui est caché. Ainsi quand nostre Seigneur envoie des troubles en ce monde, et que nous voyons l’iniquité qui se transporte comme sans bride, qui est comme un deluge qui s’espanche par tout,

¹²⁷ CO 33, 463, 464, 740, CO 34, 381, 386, 610; CO 35, 192, 455 and 458

¹²⁸ CO 33, 653 CO 35, 192

¹²⁹ CO 35, 85-86, 190, 191, 193, 194

¹³⁰ CO 33, 123, 257; CO 34, 459, CO 35, 93, 455

¹³¹ CO 33, 357

¹³² CO 35, 93

¹³³ CO 33, 456, CO 34, 65, 229, 496; CO 35, 498

et que nous n'appercevons pas que Dieu y vueille resister, mais qu'il semble que toutes choses vont là comme à l'abandon: que les bons sont opprimez, et combien qu'ils souspirent et gémissent à Dieu, qu'il ne fait point de semblant de les secourir: quand, di-ie, nous voyons tout cela, il nous faut avoir une raison plus haute que nostre sens naturel. Et nous faut lors resoudre, que tant y a que Dieu nous assiste encores: et aussi veuqu'il ne permet pas que le monde soit du tout abysme, mais qu'il y a encores quelque bride secrete, qu'il retient les meschans, que nous voyons que tout n'est pas en sang, et en meurtres: cognoissons que Dieu domine, encores que ce soit d'une façon obscure.¹³⁴

When God was hidden, it was as if the sun were shining behind the clouds. Many might have thought it was absent, but it was only hidden. Likewise, God was discernible in His creation, but at the same time remained a “Deus Absconditus.” God ruled the universe, although His Providence was not always visible. Although the universe reflected the glory of God, as Susan Schreiner pointed out, history “is awash in blood.”¹³⁵

The tension between a God, who was at the same time present and hidden, revealed and concealed, led to the seemingly contradictory interpretations that marked Calvin’s preaching. Some of the divine attributes that the Reformer examined on the basis of God’s revelation were later discussed under the presupposition of God’s hiddenness. These included justice, wisdom, goodness, glory, majesty, judgement. This doubleness explains how it was possible for Calvin to arrive at seemingly contradictory conclusions. Job maintained a good quarrel, but did handle it ill and his

¹³⁴ CO 34, 220

¹³⁵ S. Schreiner, “Through a mirror dimly, Calvin’s Sermons on Job,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 183

friend set forth an unjust matter, but did convey it well. Job was sound, but blasphemed God. The contradiction touched Calvin himself, who at one and the same time served as the lawyer for God and for Job.

This inconsistency is understood only when one imagines these two perspectives of the French Reformer. If one only considered God's revelation, one had to admit that Job was unjustly punished by a God who infringed upon their alliance. On the other hand, if one considered the fact that revelation could not exhaust God's mystery, then everything found its proper solution: Job remained innocent, and at the same time, imperfect. God was just, although His justice could not be measured according to human standards.

6.4 The double justice and the double wisdom

In the attempt to overcome this tension between contradictory statements, Calvin felt forced to define the word "justice" more fully. What does it mean to say, God is just? What is the starting point and what are the parameters of human reflection upon these words? Was the justice of God reducible to the narrow limits of human perception? In order to answer these questions Calvin resorted to the concept of "double justice." It is not surprising that this theme, as R. Stauffer pointed out,¹³⁶ found particular expression in *Sermons on Job*. In fact, it was only in this book that Calvin found it necessary to defend God's justice.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, Calvin had already had opportunity to deal with the problem of God's justice in *Sermons on Job*. In Sermon 30, while analyzing the text of Job 3:2 with the questions "Does God subvert judgment? Or

¹³⁶ R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 118

does the Almighty pervert justice?” he had answered without the slightest indecision: “Ici nous sommes admonestez d'attribuer à Dieu cest honneur, qu'il est la fontaine de toute equité et droiture, et qu'il est impossible qu'il face rien, qui ne soit bon et iuste.”¹³⁷ This conviction was reiterated innumerable times and defended even when the circumstances might have led to different conclusions. Yet, despite these unequivocal statements, Calvin was aware that the question of how God's justice might be maintained was far from being answered, since the problem raised at the beginning of the book of Job had remained unsolved: Why did Job suffer? Calvin was caught in a dilemma. If Job was innocent, then his suffering was unjust and his charges against God absolutely justified. If Job were guilty, then God's justice had been maintained, but Satan would win the wager with God.

The terms of the problem were further aggravated by two further and conflicting assertions: on one hand, the innocence of Job¹³⁸ and on the other hand, Job's confession of sin.¹³⁹ Calvin was able to get out from this seeming impasse by taking recourse to the concept of the “double justice” of God. The starting point of this reflection can be found in Sermon 6, when he commented on Eliphaz's statement: “Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker? If He puts no trust in His servants, If He charges His angels with error.” After having pointed out that even the angels were creatures “vanes et debiles,” he wrote:

Il est vray que ceci semble nouveau à, ceux qui ne sont point exercez en
l'Ecriture sainte: mais si nous cognoissons que c'est de la iustice de Dieu, il
ne se faut point esbahir que les Anges mesmes soyent trouvez coupables,

¹³⁷ CO 33, 371

¹³⁸ See Job 1:8 and Job 42:8

¹³⁹ See Job 39:33, 40:4 and 42:1-6

quand il les voudroit accompagner à luy: car il nous faut tousiours revenir à ce point, que les biens qui sont aux creatures sont en mesure petite au pris de ce qui est en Dieu, qui est du tout infini.¹⁴⁰

In Sermon 37 Calvin went more into detail by distinguishing between two kinds of justice:

Dieu nous a bien baillé en sa Loy un patron et une image de sa iustice, mais c'a esté selon nostre capacité. Orqu'il ne peut monter si haut, que de concevoir ce qui est en Dieu en perfection. Ainsi donc la iustice mesme qui est contenue en la Loy de Dieu, est une iustice qui est compassee à la mesure des hommes. Nous l'appellerons bien iustice parfaite, et la pourrons nommer ainsi: et l'Ecriture la nomme iustice parfaite: voire au regard de nous, c'est à dire, au regard des creatures. ... Ceste iustice-la donc est une iustice que les Anges et les hommes doivent rendre à Dieu, pour luy obeir et complaire, voire entant qu'ils sont ses creatures. Mais tant y a qu'il y a encores une iustice plus haute en Dieu, c'est-à-dire une perfection, à laquelle nous ne pouvons pas atteindre, et de laquelle nous ne pouvons pas approcher, iusques à ce que nous soyons faits semblables à luy, et que nous ayons contemplé ceste gloire, qui maintenant nous est cachee, et que nous ne voyons sinon comme en un miroir, et par obscurité: alors nous serons bien autre chose que nous ne sommes maintenant.¹⁴¹

The notion of “double justice,” implied in Sermon 37 was deepened, when Calvin countered the “justice revealed in the law” with another, higher justice that he termed

¹⁴⁰ CO 33, 207

¹⁴¹ CO 33, 459

“cache,”¹⁴² “incomprehensible,”¹⁴³ “secrete,”¹⁴⁴ “plus parfaite,”¹⁴⁵ “qui passé toute nostre intelligence,”¹⁴⁶ and “plus haute.”¹⁴⁷

Prompted by the biblical texts, Calvin was compelled to analyze the dialectical character of God’s justice, and came to the conclusion that Job’s integrity was related only to “revealed justice,” by which God set the measure of what He required from human beings; establishing the criteria for “righteousness.” In the light of this conclusion, Calvin stated that Job’s claim to righteousness referred not to the higher and therefore unknown justice of God, but to a lower ‘revealed justice.’

¹⁴² CO 33, 496: “Nous voyons donc maintenant, comme il y a double iustice en Dieu, l’une c’est celle qui nous est manifestee en la Loy, de laquelle Dieu se contente, pource qu’il luy plaist ainsi: il y a une autre iustice cachee qui surmonte tous sens et apprehensions des creatures.” Compare CO 33, 613: Il y a double iustice en Dieu: c’est assavoir, celle qui nous est manifestee par la Loi, et celle qu’il tient cachee.”

¹⁴³ CO 33, 590: “La iustice à laquelle nous devons estre reglez et suiets, est par dessus nous: mais la volonté de Dieu est encores par dessus: ainsi que nous avons desia traité, qu’il y a double iustice de Dieu: l’une est celle qu’il nous a declaree en sa Loy, selon laquelle il veut que le monde se gouverne: l’autre c’est une iustice incomprehensible, tellement qu’il faut par fois que nous fermions les yeux quand Dieu besongne, et que nous ne sachions point comment ne pourquoy. Et ainsi quand la raison d’un fait de Dieu ne nous est point revelee, sachons que c’est une iustice qui est en sa volonté secrete, laquelle surmonte ceste regle qui nous est manifeste et connue.”

¹⁴⁴ CO 34, 96: “Dieu a double iustice en soy. L’une est celle qu’il nous a declaree en sa Loy. Or ceste iustice-là nous est toute notoire et connue: c’est nostre regle. Mais il y en a encores une autre en Dieu plus haute, qui nous est secrete et cachee. Car quand nous aurions accompli toute la Loy (ce qui est impossible: mais le cas posé qu’ainsi fust) si est-ce que nous n’avons point satisfait à Dieu selon sa iustice parfaite: mais nous l’aurons contenté selon qu’il veut que nous le servions, voire selon nostre portee humaine.”

¹⁴⁵ CO 34, 333-334: “Dieu combien qu’il soit tousiours iuste, a neantmoins deux especes de iustice. L’une, c’est celle qu’il nous a declaree par sa Loy: ie di iustice pour traiter les hommes, et pour les iuger. Si donc Dieu nous adiourne devant son siege, et que là il nous traite selon la regle de sa Loy, voila une espece de iustice.... Or il y a une autre espece de iustice qui nous est plus estrange: c’est quand Dieu nous voudra traiter non point selon sa Loy, mais selon qu’il peut iustement faire. Quand nostre Seigneur nous baille nostre leçon en sa Loy, et qu’il nous commande de faire ce qui est là contenu: combien que cela surmonte toutes nos vertus, et que nul homme mortel ne pourroit venir à bout d’accomplir ce que Dieu nous commande: toutes fois si est-ce que nous lui devons encores plus, et sommes obligez, et la Loy n’est pas une chose si parfaite n’exquise, que ceste iustice infinie de Dieu, suivant ce que nous avons desia veu, que selon icelle il trouveroit iniquité en ses Anges, et le soleil ne seroit point clair devant lui. Voila donc comme il y a une iustice plus parfaite que celle de la Loy.”

¹⁴⁶ CO 34, 447: “Ainsi nous voyons qu’il y a double iustice en Dieu: l’une qui nous est toute notoire, pource qu’elle est contenue en la Loy, et qu’elle a aussi quelque conformité à la raison que Dieu nous a donnee: l’autre qui passe toute nostre intelligence: nous ne la comprenons point donc sinon par foy, et faut plutost que nous l’adorions comme une chose qui nous est cachee, attendans que le dernier iour vienne, auquel nous verrons face à face ce qui nous est maintenant obscur et caché.”

¹⁴⁷ CO 33, 459, CO 33, 498, CO 33, 633 and CO 33, 726

Iob cognoissoit bien qu'il estoit un povre pecheur, il n'estoit pas si aveuglé d'orgueil, qu'il se fist à croire qu'il estoit du tout iuste, et que Dieu n'eust que mordre sur lui: mais il entend que si Dieu le vouloit traiter à la façon commune, c'est à dire, comme il a déclaré en sa Loy, qu'il benira ceux qui l'auront servi, et les traittera si doucement, qu'ils pourront bien sentir qu'il est un bon Pere: en ceste façon et suivant ceste regle, il respondroit bien devant lui. Ainsi il veut dire que Dieu use à son endroit d'une iustice qui est secrette et cachee aux hommes, qu'il ne le traite plus selon la forme de sa Loy, mais qu'il a quelque consideration que les hommes ne peuvent pas apprehender, et qui surmonte toutes leurs pensees, et tous leurs sens.¹⁴⁸

Calvin pointed out that Job was not afflicted because he had been an evil man,¹⁴⁹ as the Prologue in the Book of Job made clear. God's decision to punish Job was a result, not of Job's sins, but of God's hidden justice. This recourse to the concept of hidden justice became necessary only when Calvin came to realise that even if Job had been found innocent according to revealed justice, God could have condemned him anyway according to His hidden justice.

In Sermon 37 his opinion that God could condemn not only men but also the angels on the basis of hidden justice and independently of revealed justice was expressed with particular clarity:

Si nous avons ceste pureté la devant Dieu selon la Loy, c'est à dire, que nous eussions accompli ce que Dieu commande là (ce qui est impossible aux hommes) nous ne pourrions pas encores subsister devant luy. Mais prenons le

¹⁴⁸ CO 34, 335

¹⁴⁹ CO 33, 501: "Dieu n'afflige iamais les siens qu'il n'ait iuste raison, voire combien qu'il n'ait point esgard à leurs pechez comme Iob, il est certain qu'il est affligé non point comme un meschant."

cas, que Iob fust comme un Ange, qu'il peust suffire envers Dieu selon la iustice de la Loy: si est-ce que selon ceste iustice secrette qui est en Dieu, il se trouveroit tousiours redevable. Car ii est dit que les Anges mesmes ne pourront pas subsister devantl uy, s'il veut entrer en conte avec eux. Iob donc entend en ce passage, que quand il n'y auroit que toute pureté en luy: ie di mesmes selon la iustice de la Loy: il n'y auroit qu'ordure et infection quand il se viendrait presenter devant Dieu.¹⁵⁰

Calvin was fully aware of the fact that this statement might put the notion of God's reliability at risk, and might also increase a deep sense of insecurity in all believers. So, also in Sermon 37, the possibility that God would condemn men and the angels according to His secret justice was resolutely denied, since what mattered was not what God could do in theory, but what God had promised concretely to do.

Nenni: il n'est pas question de ce que Dieu fera: mais il est question de ce qu'il pourroit faire. Or il ne le veut point. Qu'il nous suffise donc, que si nous avons réglé nostre vie à la Loy de Dieu, nous serions reputez devant lui comme iustes: il est certain. Car il est dit, Qui fera ces choses, il vivra en icelles. La promesse n'est point pour nous frustrer ne mentir. Quoi qu'il en soit, tousiours ceci demeure, que quand nous aurons obei pleinement à la Loi de Dieu, et que nous aurons eu ceste pureté si grande, comme elle est là requise, (ce qui est impossible aux hommes mortels) toutesfois que Dieu encores ne s'en pourra pas contenter s'il ne veut: c'est à dire, il pourra trouver en soy une telle

¹⁵⁰ CO 33, 560

perfection, que tout ce que nous aurons apporté ne sera rien: non pas qu'il le face, comme i'ay desia dit.¹⁵¹

In Sermon 88, coming back to the concept of accommodation, Calvin highlighted once again the idea that men, through the observance of the law, although imperfect in comparison with the higher justice of God, could be accepted by God:

Voila donc comme il y a une iustice plus parfaite que celle de la Loy: et si Dieu en vouloit user, encores qu'un homme eust accompli tout ce que la Loy contient, si est-ce qu'il ne laisseroit pas d'estre condamné. Vray est que nostre Seigneur n'en use point: car il s'accommode iusques là à nous, qu'il reçoit et accepte ceste iustice telle qu'il l'a commandee, comme si elle estoit du tout parfaite, encores qu'elle soit aucunement compassee à la condition humaine: ie di de l'homme non corrompu par le peché.¹⁵²

Trusting in the mystery of the hidden justice of God, which was not always visible,¹⁵³ the believer must glorify His incomprehensible judgements,¹⁵⁴ and confess that God was just, “encores que nous ne sachions point, pourquoy c'est qu'il le fait.”¹⁵⁵

Although it can seem that God afflicts men “sans propos,” Calvin eagerly pointed out that this phrase could be understood only in the context of our limited knowledge:

Nous avons desia dit ci dessus, que la iustice de Dieu se cognoist doublement.

Car aucunesfois Dieu punira les pechez qui sont tout notoires aux hommes

La iustice de Dieu se cognoist aussi en ses iugemens secrets, quand nous

¹⁵¹ CO 33, 461

¹⁵² CO 34, 334

¹⁵³ CO 33, 445: “La iustice de Dieu n'est pas tousiours apparente.”

¹⁵⁴ CO 34, 591

¹⁵⁵ CO 33, 377, 503

voyons des personnes où il n'y avoit point des vices notables, mesmes où il y avoit quelques vertus: Dieu les afflige et les tourmenté.¹⁵⁶

Calvin rejected the idea of Job's friends, that the reasons for divine justice were always discernible. Instead, he made a very clear distinction: Whereas the universe clearly made known divine judgements, human history revealed another worrying image:

Voici Bildad qui est confus du tout en son propos. Car il dit, Dieu ayant créé le monde à un ordre certain, lequel est maintenu par lui: il s'ensuit donc que ses iugemens sont tous certains, et qu'on les peut voir et cognoistre. Or la consequence est mauvaise. Pourquoi? Dieu veut que le soleil se couche et se leve, et que par cela nous soyons advertis que iusques en la fin du monde il nous donnera les choses qui nous sont necessaires pour nous preserver ici. Quand nous voyons les vignes, et les arbres, et la terre qui fructifie, et bien, c'est Dieu qui nous monstre qu'il a le soin de ceste vie, combien qu'elle soit mortelle et caduque: mais c'est comme s'il nous prenoit par la main pour nous eslever là haut au ciel à soy. Dieu donc veut bien que nous cognoissions cela tout priveement, et nous le commande: mais quant à ses iugemens, il y a une autre raison, car il veut que seulement nous en ayons quelque goust en ceste vie, et que nous attendions en patience, qu'ils apparussent au dernier iour, car alors les choses qui sont maintenant confuses seront remises en estat: iusques là Dieu n'accomplira point ses iugemens qu'en partie.¹⁵⁷

The distinction between the “revealed” and the “hidden” justice of God enabled Calvin to solve all those cases in which the divine justice was challenged, the

¹⁵⁶ CO 33, 437

¹⁵⁷ CO 34, 69

foremost having been that of the suffering of innocents. Whilst the chastisement of the wicked derived from His revealed justice, he argued, the suffering of the innocent had to do with the hidden justice of God.¹⁵⁸

Another example of this reasoning was related to the text of Job 21:16-21. Here Calvin tried, at first, to defend God's decision, employing the assumption that all people, including children, deserve judgment:

Mais quand il est dit que Dieu rendra l'iniquité des peres au giron des enfans, ce n'est point qu'il leur face tort: mais c'est pource qu'il laisse là les meschans. Or quand nous sommes delaissez de Dieu, que pouvons nous faire sinon tont mal? Voila donc Dieu qui ne fait point ceste grace aux meschans de leur donner son saint Esprit: et ainsi il faut que le diable regne sur eux, et qu'il les sollicite pour provoquer de plus en plus l'ire de Dieu, et avancer leur perdition. Les enfans donc sont là enveloppez avec leurs peres: car quand une maison est maudite de Dieu, la voila en la possession et servitude de Satan, l'Esprit de Dieu n'y domine point. Ainsi donc les enfans sont tellement punis pour leurs peres, que c'est une iuste vengeance sur eux-mesmes aussi: ils ne peuvent pas dire, Nous sommes innocens: car ils sont trouvez coupables devant Dieu comme leurs peres.¹⁵⁹

Only at the end he was forced to take recourse to the conclusive argument:

Dieu qui a sa façon, laquelle nous est aucunesfois estrange: si faut-il que nos esprits soyent humiliez, pour dire, Seigneur, nous trouverons bon tout ce que tu feras, encores qu'il ne soit point conforme à nostre phantasie. Yoila donc ce que nous avons à noter sous ce mot de cacher, ou reserver, quand il est dit, que

¹⁵⁸ CO 33, 437-438

¹⁵⁹ CO 33, 249-250

Dieu reserve aux enfans des meschans la punition qu'il a exercee sur leurs peres.¹⁶⁰

Closely associated with the notion of “double justice” is the idea of “double wisdom,” which, as R. Stauffer pointed out, “ne se retrouve nulle part dans son oeuvre.”¹⁶¹ The basis of it is more or less the same: There is a wisdom that we can know and understand, since it was revealed in the Bible and there is another, unfathomable wisdom:

Il y a une sagesse en Dieu, secrette et qui surmonte tout esprit humain, et à laquelle nous ne pouvons encores parvenir. Il est vray que Dieu, quant à soy n'est point sage en une sorte et en l'autre : (car c'est une chose inséparable, et qu'on ne peut point diviser ne partir, que la sagesse de Dieu) mais quant à nous et à nostre regard, Dieu est sage en deux sortes, c'est assavoir, que nous pouvons dire qu'il y a deux especes de la sagesse de Dieu, voire quant à nous. Et comment cela? Il y a ceste sagesse qui est contenue en sa parole, laquelle il nous communique tellement, que nous sommes sages quand nous avons receu l'instruction qu'il nous donne. Voila donc la sagesse de Dieu, laquelle il communique aux creatures: et puis il y a ceste sagesse laquelle il retient en soy. Et qu'est-ce cela? C'est ce conseil admirable, par lequel il gouverne le monde par-dessus tout ce que nous concevons. Voila Dieu qui dispose les choses que nous trouvons bien confuses quant à nostre sens. Quand les tyrans dominant, ainsi qu'il en sera parlé cy apres, qu'il y a des meschans qui seduisent les povres gens, qui menent les ames en perdition, et que les autres sont sauvez: tout cela se fait par le conseil admirable de Dieu. Or si nous

¹⁶⁰ CO 33, 250

¹⁶¹R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, p. 108

enquerons quelle est la raison de tout ceci, nous voila en un tel abysme, qu'il faudra que tous nos sens soyent engloutis. Voila donc une sagesse que Dieu retient vers soy, laquelle il ne communique point aux hommes; comme aussi il est impossible d'y parvenir.¹⁶²

6.5 The eschatological hope

“Calvin,” as David Holwerda pointed out, “has never been famous for his eschatology.”¹⁶³ Is it not true that he refused to write a commentary on the book of *Revelation*? A careful analysis of the French Reformer's works reveals this caricature to be groundless. As Martin Schulze demonstrated in his important book *Meditatio futurae vitae*, eschatology turns out to have been of utmost importance to Calvin's theology, since “it determines his whole interpretation of Christianity.”¹⁶⁴ In fact Calvin turned the Christian's attention toward the future, stressing that hope was of central importance. He regarded the present life of the Christians, with all its travail and groaning, as unfulfilled, unless our redemption culminated in the resurrection and eternal felicity. T.H.L. Parker pointed this out when he described Calvin's perspective as an “unrealized eschatology, that is to say, the final triumph of Christ and His Church has not yet come but lies still in the future.”¹⁶⁵ In fact, the doctrine of providence played a significant role in Calvin's theology. The belief that “Dieu

¹⁶² CO 33, 479-580.

¹⁶³ “D.E. Holwerda, “Eschatology and History: A Look at Calvin's eschatological vision”, in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 110

¹⁶⁴ I owe this quotation to T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1972) p. 101

¹⁶⁵ T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God*, p. 101

gouverne, et que tout est sous sa conduite et son conseil”¹⁶⁶ demonstrates a dynamic vision of history. An eschatological vision was necessary to his perceptions of the sovereignty of God.

This eschatological vision found its best corollary in the belief of immortality¹⁶⁷ which in Calvin’s opinion was not taken into account by Job’s friends, who thought that Job was punished because he was a sinner.¹⁶⁸ In a very significant passage, commenting the text of Job Calvin asked:

Et pourtant il ne faut point que nous facions une regle generale que les meschans soyent punis en ce monde: car il ne faudroit point qu'il y eust iugement reservé iusques au dernier iour. Que deviendrait l'immortalité des ames? Que deviendrait l'esperance que nous avons de la resurrection? Tout cela seroit aneanti. Ainsi donc Eliphaz pervertit tout, quand il veut faire une regle generale de certains exemples que Dieu a donné.¹⁶⁹

Given this perspective one can understand why the notions of “double justice” and “double wisdom,” however central they were, didn't exhaust Calvin’s vindication of God’s justice: The tension between revealed and hidden justice couldn’t be prolonged indefinitely. Only in the last day, the “mysterium iniquitatis” would receive a definitive answer and partial vision would be superseded by sight.

Voila, di-ie, comme il nous faut considerer les choses presentes, et regarder que si nous en iugeons selon nostre sens humain, tout sera perverti: et c'est afin que la foi domine en nous, et que la parole de Dieu nous conduise, que ce soit

¹⁶⁶ CO, 34, 222. In Sermon 145 Calvin wrote also: “Tout est sous la main de Dieu, et que rien ne se fait que par sa volonté, et disposition.” (CO 35, 334)

¹⁶⁷ This word recurs 30 times

¹⁶⁸ See for example CO 34, 61

¹⁶⁹ CO 33, 302

comme une lampe pour nous monstrier le chemin au milieu des tenebres de ce monde, iusques à ce que nous en soyons parvenus à ceste clarté celeste, où il n'y aura point de cognoissace en partie: mais où il y aura toute perfection quand nous contemplerons nostre Dieu face à face.

Calvin held that the difficulty of perceiving providence in the disorder of human history was not eternal, but was temporary. Now we know only in part, but, he affirmed, “au dernier iour toutes choses nous seront cognues,”¹⁷⁰ and we will be able “de savoir tous les Secrets de Dieu.”¹⁷¹ In the last day “les choses qui sont maintenant confuses seront remises en Estat,”¹⁷² “et perfection.”¹⁷³ “Ce qui est maintenant comme enseveli, sera tout manifeste,”¹⁷⁴ “toutes choses seront decouvertes.”¹⁷⁵ And with even more hopeful and enthusiastic accents he stressed the miracle that would occur in that day when “mon corps ietté au sepulchre, sera restauré,”¹⁷⁶ and “nous aurons pleine revelation des choses que nous cognoissons maintenant en partie,”¹⁷⁷ and “nous verrons Dieu face à face en sa gloire et en sa maiesté.”¹⁷⁸

An affirmation of the transitory nature of the present situation and the fact that the believers life was hidden in God found a particular poetic expression in Sermon 32:

Il est vray qu'en l'ny ver il semblera que les arbres soyent morts, nous verrons la pluye qui sera là comme pour les pourrir, ils en seront tant pleins qu'ils en

¹⁷⁰ CO 33, 534

¹⁷¹ CO 33, 721

¹⁷² CO 34, 69

¹⁷³ CO 34, 189

¹⁷⁴ CO 34, 255

¹⁷⁵ CO 34, 311 and 494

¹⁷⁶ CO 34, 130

¹⁷⁷ CO 35, 28

¹⁷⁸ CO 34, 216

crevent: et bien voila une pourriture. Apres, la gelée viendra, comme pour les brusler et desseicher. Nous verrons toutes ces choses, nous ne verrons point une seule fleur:cela est retranché. Voila donc une espece de mort,qui dure non point pour un iour ne pour deux, mais quatre mois ou cinq. Or tant y a que la vie des arbres est cachée, la verdure est en la racine, et au coeur du bois. Ainsi donc en est-il que nostre vie est cachée, non point en nous: car ce seroit encores une povre cachette: il ne faudroit point grande gelée pour la brusler, ne grande pluyepour la corrompre: car mesmes nous portons le feu et la gelée en nous pour la consumer: mais nostre vie est cachée en Dieu, il en est le gardien.¹⁷⁹

As T. H. L. Parker commented:

It is in the Christian, like the life of trees in winter, hidden, but waiting to show itself in the fulfillment of time. Our life is elsewhere; says Calvin, it is now hidden, but it will be revealed to us at the coming of the Redeemer”¹⁸⁰

Often Calvin used the image of a pilgrimage and insisted on the fact we ought to learn “d'estre pelerins en ce monde, d'estre errans,”¹⁸¹ “voyagers et vagabons.”¹⁸²

And yet, for Calvin, the transiiveness of the present life didn't imply that God had to remain hidden forever. Although Christian life remained hidden in Christ and in God and one could not expect heaven on earth, the tension between the revealed and the hidden justice of God would disappear on the last day:

¹⁷⁹ CO 33, 402. I owe this quotation to T. Derek, *Calvin's Teaching on Job*, p. 240

¹⁸⁰ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, p. 103

¹⁸¹ CO 34, 397. See also CO 34, 151, 261

¹⁸² CO 34, 490 and CO 34, 397

Ainsi nous voyons qu'il y a double iustice en Dieu: l'une qui nous est toute notoire, pource qu'elle est contenue en la Loy, et qu'elle a aussi quelque conformité à la raison que Dieu nous a donnée: l'autre qui passe toute nostre intelligence: nous ne la comprenons point donc sinon par foy, et faut plustost que nous l'adorions comme une chose qui nous est cachée, attendans que le dernier iour vienne, auquel nous verrons face à face ce qui nous est maintenant obscur et caché.¹⁸³

Calvin stressed that justice would be fully restored on the last day: “les meschans seront privez de la benediction que Dieu a promise à ses fideles”¹⁸⁴ and they will be afflicted,¹⁸⁵ excluded,¹⁸⁶ exterminated,¹⁸⁷ ruined,¹⁸⁸ defeated,¹⁸⁹ confused,¹⁹⁰ destroyed,¹⁹¹ even if “il semble qu'ils doivent tousiours demeurer en leur estat.”¹⁹² The possibility that the wicked might be pardoned¹⁹³ or have peace,¹⁹⁴ was completely excluded: “Dieu convertira le tout à mal, et les exposera en opprobre et diffame

¹⁸³ CO 34, 447

¹⁸⁴ CO 34, 170

¹⁸⁵ CO 35, 91

¹⁸⁶ CO 35, 381

¹⁸⁷ CO 34, 156

¹⁸⁸ CO 34, 74: “Dieu attende les meschans, et qu'en fin il les prenne par le talon pour les precipiter en ruine.”

¹⁸⁹ CO 34, 310

¹⁹⁰ CO 35, 559

¹⁹¹ CO 35, 460

¹⁹² CO 34, 355. It is quite impossible to quote all the sentences that Calvin used. For instance the sentence “Dieu ne laisse pas les meschans impunis” recurs 6 times, namely in CO 34, 76, 89, 139, 145, 201, 215. The sentence “Punir le mechans” recurs 11 times, namely in CO 33, 75, 195, 231, 404, 756; CO 34, 186, 189, 200, 218, 307, 395. The sentence “chastie les mechans” recurs 2 times : CO 34, 301 and 311

¹⁹³ CO 35, 197: “Car là il ne pardonne pas, mais il nourrist les meschans, comme on engraisse les boeufs et les porceaux, afin de les tuer.”

¹⁹⁴ CO 34, 498

envers tous.”¹⁹⁵ This comforting assurance, in Calvin’s opinion, should have infused the confidence “qu'estans membres de Iesus Christ ils ne peuvent perir.”¹⁹⁶

In each of the *Sermons on Job*, there is a deep protest against injustice, and it is not by chance that one of most prevalent terms is “vengeance.” This word, instead of having a negative meaning, referred to God, and to the last judgment which Calvin described as horrible,¹⁹⁷ but just.¹⁹⁸ It was a judgement directed not toward the righteous, but against “les mechants,”¹⁹⁹ “ses ennemis,”²⁰⁰ “sur ceux qui le mesprisent, et qui s'eslevent à l'encontre de luy,”²⁰¹ “sur les incredules et rebelles,”²⁰² “sur ceux qui persevereront obstinement à desobeir à la Loy de Dieu,”²⁰³ “sur ceux qui taschent de s'eslever ainsi contre luy, qui iettent paroles d'orgueil et de presumption,”²⁰⁴ “sur tous ceux qui n'ont point cherché d'avoir paix avec luy,”²⁰⁵ “envers ceux qui le mesprisent, voire tous ceux qui se dressent à l'encontre de lui, tous ceux qui se fourvoyent du bon chemin.”²⁰⁶

In a moving passage Calvin described the lesson that believers might take from this teaching:

Car nous voyons comme il a exercé vengeance sur tous ceux qui s'estoyent

¹⁹⁵ CO 34, 177

¹⁹⁶ CO 33, 160

¹⁹⁷ CO 33, 261, CO 33, 375, CO 33, 761, CO 34, 264, CO 34, 280, CO 34, 380, CO 35, 177, CO 35, 251, CO 35, 290

¹⁹⁸ CO 33, 75, CO 33, 204, CO 33,304, CO 34, 88, CO 34, 400

¹⁹⁹ CO 33, 740, CO 34, 196, CO 34, 369, CO 34, 468

²⁰⁰ CO 34, 366

²⁰¹ CO 33, 229

²⁰² CO 33, 232

²⁰³ CO 33, 343

²⁰⁴ CO 33, 371

²⁰⁵ CO 33, 735

²⁰⁶ CO 34, 462

adonnez à cruauté, à rapines, et autres extorsions: apres, comme il a puni les paillardises, et autres infections quand elles ont par trop regné: nous voyons puis apres comme il a puni les pariures, les cruauté, qu'il n'a peu porter l'orgueil des hommes. Ne faut-il point quand nous regarderons à cela, qu'il nous serve aussi bien aujourdhuy? Retenons bien donc ceste leçon qui nous est ici monstree, c'est à savoir, puis que Dieu dès la creation du monde n'a cessé de tousiours nous donner quelques advertissemens pour monstrier qu'il est Iuge du monde, que nous apprenions de le craindre, et de cheminer en sollicitude, et que les punitions qu'il a faites sur les meschans nous soyent autant de miroirs, et autant de brides pour nous retenir.²⁰⁷

Calvin understood that his arguments might raise further questions, such as why does God not punish the wicked now? Why does one have to wait until the last judgment? He answered these objections, saying that if God were to punish every sin in the moment it happened, it would seem as if nothing would be left for the final judgment:

Car s'il punissoit tous les pechez des hommes nous estimerions estre desia venus iusques à la fin, ii n'y auroit plus d'esperance que nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ nous deust recueillir à soy. Ainsi donc nous avons besoin que Dieu laisse beaucoup de fautes impunies: il est besoin aussi que les bons soyent affligez, et qu'il semble qu'ils ayent perdu leurs peines en servant à Dieu.²⁰⁸

The fact that God would delay judgment until the last day didn't mean that He wouldn't punish the wicked while they lived here on earth. For Calvin it was absolutely clear that God ruled and governed the universe and history. In fact, if He had not punished some sins within a person's lifetime, one might have been tempted

²⁰⁷ CO 34, 146

²⁰⁸ CO 33, 443

to believe that there was to be no final judgment. Even so, Calvin maintained it was not possible to establish a general rule that God punishes evildoers and delivers the righteous, since there might be judgements which we find incomprehensible:²⁰⁹

Et pourtant il ne faut point que nous facions une regle generale que les meschans soyent punis en ce monde: car il ne faudroit point qu'il y eust iugement reservé iusques au dernier iour. Que deviendrait l'immortalité des ames? Que deviendrait l'esperance que nous avons de la resurrection? Tout cela seroit aneanti.²¹⁰

In Sermon 76 he wrote:

Vray est que les fideles, quand ils sont affligez de la main de Dieu, se relevent tousiours de ceste esperance, que le mal ne sera point perpetuel: comme ils ont la promesse, que si l'ire de Dieu a duré pour une minute de temps, sa misericorde continuera envers eux sans fin. Voila donc les fideles qui se peuvent bien consoler, et le doivent faire, sachans que Dieu les fera germer derechef: comme aussi l'Ecriture sainte use souvent de ceste similitude, qu'encores qu'ils soyent coupez, la racine demeure en terre.²¹¹

The eschatological vision of the French Reformer was destined to have significant consequences for his defense of God. In fact, if the knowledge that one had of God was partial and incomplete, so also any human attempt to vindicate God's justice would be partial and fragmentary. It is for this reason that Calvin's "Theodicy," however exhaustive, cannot be understood independently of his eschatological vision.

²⁰⁹ Sermon 97 answered the same question : "Il est vray que cela ordinairement se voit durant ceste vie presente: mais non pas tousiours, il n'en faut pas faire une regle generale qui n'ait nulle exception, ce seroit par trop assuiettir Dieu." CO 34, 445

²¹⁰ CO 34, 302

²¹¹ CO 34, 198-199

Since the believer knows only in part, only in part would one be able to defend God's justice. Exactly as it took place in the book of Job, on the last day, only then would God vindicate "His own honour,"²¹² "His own glory,"²¹³ "worship,"²¹⁴ and "His own right."²¹⁵

It is for this reason that instead of responding "to the problem of evil with an eschatology, rather than a theodicy," as Theodore Plantinga claimed,²¹⁶ Calvin's emphasis on the notion of "Deus Absconditus" can be rightly understood only in the light of a theodicy that reaches its climax and conclusion in an eschatology.

This conviction that our miseries will not last forever and the meaning of life will be revealed to us in the last day found expression in Sermon 53:

Nos maux ne dureront pas tousiours: la briefveté de ceste vie ne nous doit pas fascher alors, mais plustost consoler... Dieu ne veut pas que nous languissions ici tousiours: il est vrai que nous y sommes suiets à beaucoup de povretez, en sorte que celui qui cognoist bien sa condition, doit tousiours gemir et souspirer cependant qu'il est au monde: mais Dieu y a mis fin, et quand il nous appelle à soy, voila un bon repos et seur. Il n'est point question là que nous ayons une vie egale à ceste-ci en longueur de temps: mais Dieu nous fait participans de sa vie propre, qui est immortelle. Et pourtant consolons-nous quand nous avons de quoi nous resiouir en la briefveté de nostre vie, que nous avons matiere d'estre patiens, et de ne nous point fascher par trop. Et pourquoi? Car si nous avons ceste esperance de la vie celeste, alors nous cognoistrans que ce monde

²¹² Calvin, *Commentaries on Amos*, Vol. XIV, 387

²¹³ Calvin, *Commentaries on Zephaniah*, Vol. XV, 284

²¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on Daniel*, Vol. XII, 380

²¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on Haggai*, Vol. XV, 331

²¹⁶ T. Plantinga, *Learning to live with Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 135

n'est rien. Et si nous y sommes quelquesfois faschez, et bien, nous gemirons, mais il y aura consolation quant et quant, pource que nous serons certains que Dieu nous amenera à une bonne fin, quand il nous recueillira à son repos eternal. Voila donc comme nous avons à noter ceste doctrine, si nous en voulons bien faire nostre profit.²¹⁷

In the light of this strong eschatological hope that permeates the whole of his teaching, Calvin's yearning found its best expression in the following prayer that I present as the conclusion to this research.

O mon Dieu, Tes conseils sont incompréhensibles, j'attendray patiemment que Tu me faces cognoistre pourquoy, quand ie ne puis pour le present cognoistre d'avantage pour ma rudesse, et l'infirmité de mon Esprit. Ainsi, Seigneur, apres que j'auray demeuré ici comme un povre aveugle, Tu m'ouvrira les yeux, Tu me feras sentir où ces choses tendent, quelle en doit estre l'issue, et i'y profiterai mieux qu'à present.²¹⁸

6.6 Overview

Given the foregoing discussion a series of points could be summed up as follows :

- 1) For Calvin, God remains hidden in His essence, in His creation and in His modus operandi.
- 2) The incomprehensibility of God is caused by human ontological limitation, by the restriction of God's revelation and by the active concealment of God.

²¹⁷ CO 33, 664-665

²¹⁸ CO 35, 56

3) Calvin took recourse to the Hiddenness of God not because he was interested in sheer speculation about the true essence of God, but because he was convinced that only the hidden God could give a final and definitive answer to the problem of human suffering.

4) The notion of the hiddenness of God constitutes the central argument of Calvin's vindication of God's justice. In the *Sermons on Job* this idea found its best expression when the French Reformer employed the concepts of double justice and double wisdom.

5) The fact that God remained hidden was related to the confusion and chaos of the present time and would not last indefinitely, since God would, in the last day, fully disclose the "mysterium iniquitatis."

6) Given this perspective, the eschatological hope represents the logic completion of Calvin's "Theodicy," which otherwise would remain incomplete.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this century, in tracing Calvin's influence upon theology, William Adams Brown pointed out that it was "difficult to say anything original about him, since what he believed and what he taught has been a matter of common knowledge."¹ Even though many years have passed since Brown reached this conclusion, the essays which have been published on the French Reformer's theology have reached more or less, with some remarkable exceptions, the same conclusion. In particular, the various interpretations of Calvin's theology seem to converge on the fact that his thinking, marked by a strong emphasis on God's omnipotence, would be inadequate for contemplating answers to the problem of human suffering.

In my dissertation I have tried to demonstrate that these conclusions are simplistic, and far from being justifiable. Calvin lived in a very difficult time, marked by severe persecution, which created the backdrop for his theological production. In a world that appeared chaotic and meaningless, Calvin was continually forced to question the reasonableness of believing in a just God. He did not fail to recognize that "the wicked may go unpunished in this life and this unpleasant reality tempted him to 'remonstrate with God because he does not hurry to free the faithful and applaud their good fortune as if there were no judge in heaven'."² His own life was hard: kidney stones, nephritis,

¹ I owe this remark to the thoughtful work of John Leith "J. Calvin's doctrine of Christian Life" who quotes William Adams Brown, "Calvin's Influence upon theology," three Addresses delivered by Professors in Union Theological Seminary (New York, 1909), p.20

² I owe this quotation to W. Bouwsma, *John Calvin, a Sixteenth Century Portrait*, p. 171

hemorrhoids, migraine headaches, chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, intestinal parasites, and spastic colon ravaged his body and eventually led him to an early grave.

Notwithstanding, Calvin, “though feeble in body,” as Theodore Beza wrote of him, “steadily continued his labours in Geneva, confirmed the churches most severely afflicted by such a trial, together with all the brethren, and never ceased during this eventful period, to solicit aid from the Lord with unremitted and importunate supplications.”³ As Horton Davies reminds us, Calvin “wrote the finest Biblical systematic theology up to his day, only perhaps to be equalled by Barth in our day” and moreover, his “*Institutes* was itself, as also Barth’s *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, a theodicy.”⁴

This “Theodicy” found its best expression in the sermons that Calvin preached upon the book of Job from February 1554 to March 1555. His attempt to act as God’s lawyer⁵ was made possible by his previous juridical background. The theologian and the lawyer merged within the same person. I have structured my dissertation in such a way as to underscore this dialectical tension and experiential complementarity between the theologian and the jurist. In the first chapter, after having examined the status of recent research either on Calvin’s “Theodicy,” or on his *Sermons on Job*, I drew the conclusion that no essay so far has been able either to analyze the concept of the Hiddenness of God adequately or to interpret it in light of his “Theodicy” and preaching

In the second chapter, a reconstruction of the most significant phases of the French Reformer’s theological evolution enabled me to demonstrate that Calvin’s

3 “Life of Calvin” in the CD *The Comprehensive John Calvin*, p. 46

4 *The Vigilant God: Providence in the Thought of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Barth* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1992), p. 6

5 Monda, Davide. *La Carne, lo Spirito e l’Amore* (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2005), p. 27 and Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole. Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Paris: Champion, 1992), p.123

theological vision not only underwent a constant evolution, depending on the tragic events of his time, but also that the structure of his thought was greatly marked by his juridical background. In the third chapter, I examined in detail how Calvin used his legal skills in order to serve as God's lawyer, as well as the way in which, "in limine litis," he built up a defence based on procedural pleas.

In the fourth chapter, I analyzed Calvin's perspective on the three propositions which summed up the problem of theodicy. I attempted to demonstrate that Calvin maintained an argument for the Omnipotence and the Goodness of God, while he firmly rejected the privative conception of evil shared by his great master Augustine.

In the fifth chapter, I concentrated my analysis on the "first line defense" which Calvin developed. Taking a cue from the arguments presented by Job's friends, he took care to enumerate and to defend the several purposes that suffering could effect, which were reducible to the following three categories: the retributive, the educative, and the curative. Finally I dealt with those lines of defense which the Reformer ruled out "de facto": The reference to Christ, the doctrines of God's suffering and predestination.

In the sixth chapter, after having considered more deeply the presuppositions, causes and manifestations of God's Hiddenness, I arrived at the concept of "double justice" which Calvin used for the first time in his *Sermons on Job*. I tried to demonstrate that this concept together with that of God's "double wisdom" represented the heart of his "Theodicy". I hope to have given an original contribution to research on Calvin's theology, demonstrating the close connection between his juridical background and the structure and the content of his "Theodicy."

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