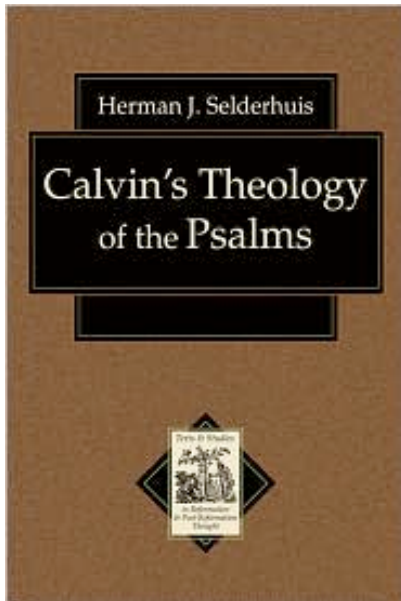


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**Selderhuis, Herman J.**

***Calvin's Theology of the Psalms***

Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought

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The volume at hand, which represents a translation of Selderhuis's text *God in het midden: Calvijns theologie van de Psalmen*, provides an important stepping stone for those who would read and study Calvin's commentary on the Psalter. Having the text in translation will prove to be a valuable contribution to students of Calvin and the Psalms.

The primary benefit of Selderhuis's work is the highly comprehensive systematization of Calvin's theological reflection as it presents itself in his commentaries on the Psalms. This has structural and theological ramifications. Structurally, this volume collates from the Latin text a broad range of Calvin's perspectives on a number of theological issues. Taking his lead from Calvin's writing, however, Selderhuis groups his observations around his teaching regarding the nature and character of God, which dominates Calvin's teaching and from which derives his understanding of humanity and its relationship to God. The structure of the book thus takes its shape from "the thesis that neither Christology nor Pneumatology is central to Calvin's thought but rather it is the *doctrina de Deo* which fundamentally informs his biblical interpretation" (16). In fact, Selderhuis believes that Calvin's theology is not "Christocentric" but rather "utterly *theocentric*" (285).

Theologically, this volume represents a needed presentation of Calvin's "mature" (17) theology from a different perspective than his *Institutes*, for the commentary on the Psalms provides a clearer picture of how Calvin's theological framework (as presented in his *Institutes*) encounters the real life of the persecuted believer. Selderhuis writes that the commentary both complements and completes the theology represented in the *Institutes* because of its pastoral, yet highly profound, character (284).

As another strength of this volume, Selderhuis's perspective of the commentary also gives due diligence to the biography of Calvin. Such attention given to Calvin's life is fitting, given the great influence that the commentator's life setting had upon his view of the text. In fact, Selderhuis keenly points out that Calvin's own feelings and situation in light of great persecution detrimentally influenced his exposition at some points. An example is Ps 18, where he points out that Calvin superimposes his wishes to stay in the study upon his understanding that David wanted to return to raising sheep, a supposition foreign to the text (34).

Throughout his work, Selderhuis is quite fair to this Reformation commentator. Whereas there seem to be times where he could have severely launched into a refutation of Calvin's comments, he for the most part allows Calvin's own words to explain and defend him. Selderhuis concerns himself more with a clear presentation of Calvin's thought rather than a rebuttal. Yet when he does point out inconsistencies (see above), he does so graciously. Fairness also manifests itself in his refusal to force a center to his theology, beyond the global theme of theology proper discussed above.

I thoroughly enjoyed my reading of Selderhuis's volume, being encouraged particularly by the practical summary of Calvin's teaching on the Psalms. I appreciated especially his summary of Calvin's view of the relationship of the Old Testament and New Testament in chapter 5, as well as his explanation of Calvin's perspective of the covenant. However, reading from the viewpoint of one who teaches and studies the Old Testament, I found myself wanting more commentary and evaluation by Selderhuis himself. Thus, with the clear recognition that Selderhuis's goal in writing this book would be clearly different from mine in reflecting on Calvin's commentary, I humbly mention a few things I believe are missing (or at least those that might augment his fine work). I find these particularly compelling because Selderhuis is evaluating the theology of a precritical exegete.

The first derives from the manner in which the material is presented, namely, through a topic under which assorted comments by Calvin are summarized and/or quoted in an almost "proof-text" manner. Although stepping back and observing the big picture is helpful in some senses, such a presentation lends itself to a dismantling of Calvin's

commentary in the same way that a proof-text systematic theology may tend to do. Calvin makes his statements within the context of careful exposition of each psalm, which he carefully summarizes for the reader. Thus, his theology is developed within the context of meditation on individual passages, the meaning of which he derives in context. His (exegetical) methodology is vital to his reflection, and Selderhuis makes little comment on how Calvin was reading the text. As a result, I longed for Selderhuis to answer questions about Calvin's view of the Psalter as a complete text, the relationship (if any) that Calvin saw between individual psalms, the progression of his teaching throughout the Psalter, the way Calvin read the text in light of the rest of the Old Testament (not just the New Testament), and the like. Moreover, I wanted to hear more about how Calvin came to summarize each psalm and what that teaches the modern reader of the Psalter. On the one hand, I recognize that these questions would fit better in a book entitled "Calvin's Exegesis of the Psalms." However, on the other hand, it is his exegesis and subsequent exposition that drives his theology, so I believe such questions are not alien to such a work.

The second is the messianic import of the Psalter. Granted, there are times when those important passages are discussed, particularly as they relate to the New Testament. However, I believe an important addition would be the evaluation of those passages that are typically considered Christocentric. While it is true that Calvin may not have focused on them the same way other more ancient or modern writers may or that Calvin simply assumed they pointed to Christ, it would have been interesting to read of the manner in which Calvin treated those passages and Selderhuis's evaluation of this. Again, perhaps the volume was not intended to answer these questions; it certainly opens the door to the question.

Third, I was particularly interested in Calvin's methodology for reading the psalms in light of those who went before (such as Theodoret of Cyrus). Selderhuis treats his relationship to Luther on several levels, but that is ultimately the extent of contextualizing Calvin's reading. This is no surprise, given that the volume appears in a series on Reformation and post-Reformation thought and that it is primarily a summary of what Calvin wrote. However, the character and role of pre-critical reading of the Old Testament is an interesting question today in biblical studies. It would seem that Calvin's commentary would make an important contribution to this discussion.

Selderhuis has given much for the reader to consider. Whereas Selderhuis's volume will be most beneficial for the one needing a systematic look at the theology of this important Reformation personality, particularly in regard to the place of his theological reflections in the history of the church, the biblical scholar will also glean some (albeit far less) helpful

content for consideration. Further, Calvinists will be challenged in their presuppositions about their doctrinal beliefs, and any reader will be encouraged in his or her faith.