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REVIEW ARTICLES

HEROIC IDEAS AND HERO-WORSHIP

Thomas Müntzer: apocalyptic mystic and revolutionary. By Hans-Jürgen Goertz. Translated by Jocelyn Jacquiery and edited by Peter Matheson. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993. Pp. xxii + 230. £22.50.

The Reformation: roots and ramifications. By Heiko A. Oberman. Translated by Andrew C. Gow. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994. Pp. xvi + 232. £14.95.

Calvin's Old Testament commentaries. By T. H. L. Parker. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986 (reprinted 1993). Pp. viii + 240. £13.95.

Calvin's New Testament commentaries. By T. H. L. Parker. 2nd edition. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993. Pp. x + 258. £13.95.

The leading reformers commonly arouse admiration as well as fascination. There is nothing surprising or even improper in such a response: they were generally figures of dedication, integrity, and in some cases fearsome intelligence. However, responses to the reformers as people are, like so much else, conditioned by history. In the first few centuries after the Reformation its leaders were canonized by their followers within the confessions which they helped to establish. Luther became an icon among 'Lutherans' in his own time, and remained so.[1] Later, even some religious leaders who failed disastrously in their own time were adopted as icons for extraneous ideological reasons, as Thomas Müntzer was by the communist cause in the former East Germany. Most recently, the admiration of biographers for their subjects has become progressively detached from any personal commitment to their heroes' ideas. To be fascinated by a creative religious leader is enough: one need not believe that his ideas express the will of God or any enduring principle. Such emancipation from shared ideologies ought, in theory, to promote greater historical sense, and inspire a prudent relativism. In practice, a sort of moral anarchy seems to have overwhelmed historians: now, a reformer can be celebrated for any attribute, so long as he is not dull. Secondly, where character, originality and interest are the only touchstones, religious biography becomes an intriguing dialogue, where the personality of the author and that of his subject meet, and each reacts upon the other in surprising ways.

Thomas Müntzer, the prophet of an apocalyptic re-ordering of society and disastrous leader of the Thuringian peasant bands in 1525, became the theme of a whole raft of new biographies around the probable quincentenary of his birth, celebrated in 1989 just as East Germany, which officially revered him, was itself passing into history. Hans-Jürgen Goertz's biography is but one of at least a dozen works solely dedicated

[1] On Luther as an icon, see R. W. Scribner, *For the sake of simple folk: popular propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 14–36; R. W. Scribner, 'Incombustible Luther: the image of the reformer in early modern Germany', in his *Popular culture and popular movements in reformation Germany* (London, 1987), pp. 323–53; Ruth Kastner, *Geistlicher Rauffhandel: Illustrierte Flugblätter zum Reformationsjubiläum 1617* (Frankfurt, 1982), pp. 167–225.

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to Müntzer to have appeared around the centenary.[2] Its recent translation into English makes it available alongside the English-language studies of Tom Scott, Eric Gritsch, and Abraham Friesen.[3] Despite his enduring fascination for historians, Müntzer is rather a shadowy figure. The meticulous reconstruction of his career and itinerary in the classic biography by Walter Elliger entails, as Goertz suggests here, quite a lot of supposition. His own *oeuvre*, now available in one modest volume in English translation, tells us little about any save the last two years of his life.[4] As a result, and even without the pressure of Lutheran condemnation or Marxist hagiography, historians each find their own Müntzer, and biographies show quite startling differences in emphasis.

Goertz's biography traces Müntzer's career from the inside, from the perspective of his own mind. It charts his attempts to find a community where his preaching would be accepted; his spiritual evolution towards his peculiar belief in the coming triumph of the elect led by the Spirit; and his growing disillusionment as nobles, burghers, and peasants in turn failed to live up to the spiritual expectations and prophecies which he wished upon them. The main stem of the book is chronological: each stay in each town receives a chapter, until Allstedt (chs. VIII-IX). That is followed by a full discussion of the pamphlet war between Müntzer and Luther (ch. X) and the Thuringian peasant war (chs. XI-XII). It is framed by a lively discussion of images of Müntzer (ch. I), a rather impressionistic and generalized socio-economic survey (ch. II) and a final analysis of Müntzer's ideas (ch. XIII). Goertz's Müntzer flits along the penumbra between social and religious history. He was an anticlerical, an apocalyptic, and a mystic; a 'revolutionary' only in the sense that 'revolution' would allow the Spirit to break through the fear in the soul generated by 'creatureliness', somehow identified with obedience to the social hierarchy.[5] This picture, of a man led *into* social concern by his religious and personal priorities, rather than shaped by a social 'cause' in the first place, carries conviction. In some ways it approaches the interpretation of Tom Scott, though it sadly lacks the latter's scholarly precision on economic matters, and leaves his ideas about Müntzer's 'covenanted leagues' entirely unexplored.

Goertz's portrayal of Müntzer's unique religious vision enters as far as possible into the spirit of its subject, though quoting his precise words fairly rarely. It fights shy of trying to trace the origins of his thought, avoiding (for example) Abraham Friesen's plausible but unproven speculations about the influence of Tauler, Eusebius, and Augustine on the young Müntzer.[6] Müntzer appears theologically self-made, owing

[2] Scholarship on Müntzer up to the eve of the centenary is reviewed in Tom Scott, 'From polemic to sobriety: Thomas Müntzer in recent research', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 39 (1988), 557–72; more recent works include S. Bräuer and H. Junghans (eds.), *Der Theologe Thomas Müntzer* (Göttingen, 1989); U. Bubenheimer, *Thomas Müntzer: Herkunft und Bildung* (Leiden, 1989); G. Vogler, *Thomas Müntzer* (Berlin, 1989); E. Wolgast, *Thomas Müntzer: Ein Verstörer der Ungläubigen* (Berlin, 1989). Fuller references are provided in the bibliography to the translation of Goertz's work, updated from the original.

[3] Abraham Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, a destroyer of the godless: the making of a sixteenth-century revolutionary* (Berkeley, 1990); Eric W. Gritsch, *Thomas Müntzer: a tragedy of errors* (Minneapolis, 1989); Tom Scott, *Thomas Müntzer: theology and revolution in the German Reformation* (London, 1989).

[4] Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer*, pp. xix-xxi, 33–8, criticizing Walter Elliger, *Thomas Müntzer: Leben und Werk*, 2nd edn (Göttingen, 1975). Müntzer's works are edited in Guenther Franz (ed.), *Thomas Müntzer, Schriften und Briefe: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Guetersloh, 1968), translated and edited by Peter Matheson as *The collected works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh, 1988).

[5] Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer*, pp. 195–207.

[6] Compare Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, a destroyer of the godless*, pp. 10–72.

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little to Martin Luther, the Zwickau 'prophet' Nikolaus Storch, or the other peasants' leaders in 1524–5.[7] The only broader theological trait on which Goertz expands is his 'anticlericalism', a strange sort of anticlericalism which often led one cleric to oppose another, but which exemplifies Goertz's broader thesis about the Reformation.[8]

Goertz refrains from tying Müntzer down to other outside influences, because he respects his inner credo so profoundly. Here restraint and moderation disappear from Goertz's outlook. This biography approaches its subject with reverence and absolute loyalty. Müntzer's reasons for his actions are always consistent and justified. When discussing his escape from Zwickau, he notes that 'only those who generally disparage his work accuse him of cowardice'. Goertz writes the epitaph that Müntzer 'died devoted to his revolutionary mission, and … works on as the 'diligent preacher' who is still able to point out how difficult it is for us … to find a God-given and humane approach to the revolutionary source and goal of our lives'.[9]

This reverential treatment is found to some degree in most current Münzter biographies. The very opposite view still appears, if less trenchantly expressed, when Luther-scholars discuss Müntzer. This academic partisanship risks obscuring an important fact. Müntzer evoked a very similar response everywhere he went. He fascinated many who heard him, usually for a few months at most. He quarrelled bitterly with nearly every fellow-preacher he worked with, save perhaps Simon Haferitz.[10] When other reforming city preachers were in vogue, protected by their hearers, he managed to be driven out of town after town: Brunswick, Zwickau, Prague, Allstedt, Muehlhausen. Goertz says that he was labelled an 'impossible' person after his death:[11] he was evidently an impossible person in life as well. One cannot resist the impression that nearly everyone he met sooner or later found him intolerable, while the more perceptive feared him as a menace from the start.

For the Müntzer-worshippers, explaining this response is not even a question to be asked. Yet if one does ask *why* Müntzer provoked this reaction, and rejects the spurious idea of a conspiracy orchestrated from Wittenberg against him, it becomes quite difficult to pin down just what was so impossible about the man. He was abusive and rancorous towards princes and clerics, but no more so than Luther, and less than Luther in the 1540s. His apocalyptic expectation of the last days finds an exact parallel in Luther's thought, as Heiko Oberman has shown (and is discussed below). If Müntzer was politically naive, so was Christoph Schappeler, the preacher-chaplain of the Memmingen townspeople and the Swabian peasant bands, or Zwingli himself. Moreover, Müntzer's 'sufferings' for his cause, his poverty and risk-taking, lend some credibility to his extremely skilful character-assassination of Luther, gaining weight at Wittenberg, as the 'soft-living flesh'. It is not enough to say that Luther was simply on a different plane of achievement, a theological scholar of inspirational genius of the first order (though he was): one wishes to see what it was about Müntzer that was so appalling to scholars in his own time, and which scholars in *our* time have been so unable or unwilling to identify.

The answer may be located in the area where social historians are usually least comfortable, in theology itself. Here absolute values once held sway in a way they have

[7] Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer*, pp. 40–1, 51–3, 64–5, 173–4, 206; compare H.-J. Goertz, *Innere und äussere Ordnung in der Theologie Thomas Müntzers* (Leiden, 1967).

[8] See the discussions of anticlericalism in Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer*, e.g. pp. 24–6, 114, 121–2, 150, 195; for its importance in his analysis of the entire Reformation see H.-J. Goertz, *Pfaffenhass und gross Geschrei* (Munich, 1987).

[9] Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer*, pp. 69, 217.

[10] On Müntzer's dealings with Haferitz see ibid. pp. 105–6.

[11] Ibid. p. 209.

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now ceased to do. Goertz himself points out Müntzer's crucial traits, though without seeming to see their contemporary significance. Müntzer was, above all, a perfectionist mystic who believed that through his 'sufferings' the Holy Spirit had 'filled [his] existence'.[12] The divine will for the re-ordering of society flowed through him, and would flow through all those who escaped from 'creatureliness' through sufferings such as his. In the light of this captivation by the Spirit, external authority such as Scripture could not be a foundation for faith, and was indeed unnecessary.[13] Moreover, in the light of the sufferings of the mystical elect, those of Christ himself became largely exemplary: the elect had to be 'conformed' to the sacrifice of Christ. Müntzer spoke of the indwelling God far more than Christ.[14] A horrifying social assumption arises out of this constructive mass mysticism, the assumption that Tim Blanning, in the context of the French Revolutionary terror, has called 'the deadly postulate of unanimity'. If the elect are truly regenerate, truly filled with the Spirit, they will be of one mind; those who are not will turn out to be unprepared, still 'creaturely', or godless (or, in the secularized version, traitors to the cause).[15] This entirely circular, self-supporting belief system gave Müntzer unshakeable confidence in his own infallibility, while spiritualizing all his disappointments. His 'sufferings' seem to have been chiefly his rejection by dissatisfied congregations; as, for example, when the Allstedt townspeople refused to back him against the Saxon princes over the demolition of the Mallerbach field-chapel. The idea that his own personality might have brought his 'sufferings' on himself plainly never occurred to him.

Historians no longer judge reformers by external theological criteria; but sixteenth-century people did. Müntzer subjected all forms of authority, whether of church or Scripture, to that of his own 'Spirit'. Moreover, he assumed the elect could be *totally* regenerated within this life. For Luther, this entailed a fatal confusion between justification and sanctification, between the forgiveness of God and real human sin. For catholics, it rejected the need for sacramental grace. To both, it must have shown arrogance before the persistence of human sin, even in good Christians. No wonder that Luther, as Goertz admits, 'held up Müntzer's intimacy with the voice of God to general ridicule', and refused to consider 'the possible justifiability of a new doctrine of the spirit'.[16] This was not just (as Goertz claims) because Müntzer's gospel of social subversion offered an easier target to attack. By the standards of the age, Müntzer's theology was about as wrong as one could possibly imagine. Its wrongness would have been so patent as not to deserve the dignity of a detailed refutation.

Ironically, Müntzer's rants against the 'bigwigs', his anti-hierarchical invective, overshadowed the eccentricity of his religious belief in his own time. In this century his rhetoric has done the same thing, but for the opposite reason: it is found morally attractive rather than repellent. Yet, as Goertz shows with great candour, Müntzer's opposition to the great ones was not intrinsic to his earlier ideas: it arose through disillusionment. If the Ernestine Saxon princes would not adopt him as a new Daniel, then the common people must adopt him as a new John the Baptist.[17] He did not support the common people unconditionally. He approved of the peasant risings in 1525, because he thought his own expectations were being fulfilled. He warned the burghers of Allstedt that, unless they rose and freed themselves from their rulers, 'one cannot say anything to you about God'.[18] He failed at Frankenhausen, he claimed, because he began the great struggle with those who were not spiritually prepared.[19]

[12] Ibid. pp. 95–6. [13] Ibid. pp. 143–4. [14] Ibid. pp. 102–3, 110, 144.
[15] Ibid. pp. 123, 133, 179. [16] Ibid. p. 140. [17] Ibid. pp. 119–21, 131–5, 147–9.
[18] Ibid. p. 177. [19] Ibid. pp. 187–8.

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What really jars about Goertz's analysis is the contrast between his highly perceptive presentation of Müntzer's ideas, and his entirely one-sided, uncritical evaluation of their consequences. One is forced to conclude that Goertz, like Müntzer, believes that society can be reformed into a secularized version of the 'democratic theocracy'; that human nature can achieve a 'fraternal society' where all real democracies have failed.[20] It is chilling to think that in late twentieth-century Germany neither the charismatic prophet-leader nor the 'deadly unanimity' of the fraternal Utopia have lost their allure.

Thomas Müntzer and Martin Luther both lived in the shadow of their own intense expectation of the last days and the second coming. Müntzer drew the practical consequence that society must be cleansed of the ungodly in preparation. Martin Luther drew exactly the opposite inference. If the picture conveyed by the second essay in Heiko Oberman's *The Reformation: roots and ramifications* is correct, Martin Luther did not really envisage himself as a 'reformer' of the Christian community at all. He believed that he was living in the last times, when Antichrist was ravaging the church; and that this troubled time would only be brought to an end when Christ appeared, as the only true 'reformer', to re-shape human society and humanity itself. In the light of the coming apocalypse, Luther saw his role as confined to that of the evangelist or prophet, who should preach the Gospel in the face of the assaults of Satan. Such preaching was not to 'improve' Christian society in any absolute sense; it would inspire Satan to ever greater rage.[21]

This deliberately provocative essay, entitled 'Martin Luther: forerunner of the Reformation', embodies many of the characteristics which have made Heiko Oberman such a suggestive and unconventional interpreter of late medieval and Reformation thought. It takes a relatively small part of Luther's vast output, above all the 'prelude' to the 1520 tract *On the Bablyonian captivity of the church*, and re-interprets Luther's sense of his mission in the light of that text. It partly reverses our normal perceptions of the Reformation, in that it distances Luther even from his Wittenberg colleagues, above all Philipp Melanchthon, who shared Luther's theology but believed that one could carry out its implications for the visible church in the mean time.

One must straight away point out that Oberman's insight makes sense of several otherwise worrying traits in Luther's writing. First, Luther's expectation that the prelude to the divine 'Reformation' will be marked by ever greater raging of Satan against the Gospel and its ministers, explains the constant harping on the devil and the devil's work which marks out both Luther's style, and his response to theological or political controversy. Even in his own day reformers such as Oecolampadius complained of this mannerism: it was not typical of the age as a whole.[22] As another of the essays in *Roots and ramifications* points out, for Luther the presence of the devil, troubling him as he worked on his lectures, assaulting him at the Wartburg, or inflicting depression on him in the 1520s, was positively reassuring. It showed that Luther was on the right track, that the apocalyptic prophecies were being fulfilled in his experience.[23] Secondly, if Luther had a very limited notion of his own role as

[20] Ibid. pp. 212–17. [21] Oberman, *The Reformation: roots and ramifications*, pp. 27–38.

[22] On this comment see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: shaping and defining the Reformation*, trans. J. M. Schaaf (Minneapolis, 1990), p. 319 and refs.

[23] Oberman, 'Martin Luther: between the middle ages and modern times', in *The Reformation: roots and ramifications*, esp. pp. 56–70; for Oberman, Luther, and the devil see his *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Berlin, 1982), translated as *Luther: man between God and the Devil* (New Haven and London, 1990).

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'evangelist' rather than 'reformer', we can explain why he took such a negative, minimalist view of secular government for the 'remnant' of true Christians (especially in his treatise *On secular authority* of 1523). We can also understand better why Luther was one of the last in his region to produce a definitive order for reformed worship, whereas Müntzer, again appropriately, was one of the first.[24] Luther's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the visitation of the Saxon churches in the later 1520s also begins to make sense, although Oberman's description of this exercise as planning a 'strictly secular amendment' seems to strain things a bit.[25]

This plunge straight into the heart of Heiko Oberman's exegesis may have shown how well *The Reformation: roots and ramifications* has outgrown its genre, and the context in which many of its constituent parts were prepared. The volume, originally published in German in 1986,[26] consists largely of celebratory addresses from various occasions, two written in the 1960s but most dating from the wave of Reformation commemorative events in the early 1980s. These essays are no anodyne re-telling of the agreed virtues and contributions of the leading reformers: they offer highly personal statements and often idiosyncratic interpretations. Luther, undoubtedly, takes centre stage, and Oberman's Luther is a very distinctive figure. He is, as seen above, an apocalyptic waiting on events, and possessed by an almost Manichaean sense of the role of the devil in this world. Secondly, he leads his intellectual life in constant dialogue with the heritage of his scholastic training in the *via moderna* of late medieval nominalism. While Oberman seems willing to date his conversion away from his school's theology of justification relatively early,[27] he insists on the other hand that the influence of nominalist techniques and modes of thought shaped Luther throughout his life.[28]

A semantic irony results from Oberman's insistence on the relevance of scholastic training for the different approaches of Luther and the other reformers, above all Zwingli. Luther, educated in the scholastics' 'modern way', belonged to the middle ages; whereas Zwingli, with his more aggressive and rationalist desire to re-shape Christian society, belonged to the 'modern world' *because* he had been trained in the 'ancient way', the older Thomist-Scotist technique.[29] Oberman seems untroubled by this paradox; the real issue is not 'modernity' as such, however that is defined, but rather the relationship between faith and reason. The nominalists and Luther, unlike the 'realists' and Zwingli, had separated the domains of faith and logic, doubting the power of logical argument to resolve theological problems. This picture of the 'modern way' as promoting theological fideism, positivism and anti-rationalism, though traditional, rather cuts across some of Oberman's earlier arguments about nominalist theology. Its usefulness to his stance here is obvious.[30] Luther, so described, becomes a master of paradox, as he undoubtedly was. He delights in seeing the divine at work in the most improbable places: in the midst of demonic temptation, but also in the midst

[24] For a modern English edition of Luther's *On secular authority*, see H. Höpfl (ed.), *Luther and Calvin on secular authority* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 3–43. Müntzer's Allstedt service-order is edited in E. Sehling (ed.), *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1902-), i pt 1, 472–97; Luther's *German Mass* of 1525–6 is in ibid. i pt 1, 10–16, and in *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883–1948), xix, 44–113.

[25] Oberman, *The Reformation: roots and ramifications*, pp. 43–7.

[26] As *Die Reformation: Von Wittenberg nach Genf* (Göttingen, 1986).

[27] Oberman, *The Reformation: roots and ramifications*, pp. 108ff.

[28] Ibid. pp. 9–21.

[29] Ibid. pp. 195–9.

[30] For a slightly different perspective on nominalism from Oberman himself, compare his '*Facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*: Robert Holcot O. P. and the beginnings of Luther's theology', in H. A. Oberman, *The dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 84–93.

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of sin, in the mire of physical and spiritual filth, where the imagery of faeces and human self-justification combine.[31]

It is reasonable, in fact essential, to ask whether this picture of Martin Luther, with all its implications for Luther *versus* the other reformers, is a balanced one. How far has Oberman brought his own emphases to his subject, and how far has he seen what others had missed? Oberman's theological history starts from an unusual point: he has relatively little interest in systematic exposition of heads of doctrine, much more in the style and manner. He has made two main contributions to Luther studies, namely the incorporation of scholasticism and the devil. There may be more to be said. Is it necessary to invoke the *via antiqua* to explain why other reformers were so much more ready to 'reform' church and society? Does not the greater part played by Erasmian Christian humanism in their thought explain why both Zwingli and Melanchthon took such different views from Luther on church-building? It is striking that humanists, used to more measured forms of expression, were some of the first to complain of the devil-ridden tone of Luther's language.

Secondly, excessive concentration on those periods when Luther and the Reformation were both under the greatest threat may distort our image. In 1520 he expected to face the stake; in 1530–1, when apocalyptic expectations re-surfaced, religious war seemed imminent. Between those times, Luther did not just envisage his role as that of a prophetic voice, ranting ineffectually against the storm of cosmic assaults by the demon. He sought to teach his people. If one insists that Luther *never* envisaged a re-ordering of Christian society until the parousia, does that not make a nonsense of the 'Invocavit' sermons of 1522? Luther argued in these crucial addresses that teaching must come first. Once the people had learned the true meaning of the Gospel, then worship could be reformed accordingly.[32] The worship-orders of 1526 altered the liturgy; then, almost immediately, the visitations revealed the horrendous lack of Christian knowledge among pastors and laity in the countryside. Luther did not respond by apocalyptic resignation (though he did suggest sending the invincibly ignorant back to the pope!) Instead he wrote his two great *Catechisms*, the only major works entirely by Luther to be included in the Lutheran collection *Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*.[33] The achieving of an adequately taught laity, not the apocalypse, determined Luther's timetable. When the people failed to respond appropriately to his sermons, he starved them of his rhetoric until he thought they would appreciate it.[34] One cannot expect consistency from such a temperamental fireball of contending insights as Martin Luther. His complexity both makes possible the immense range of different 'Luthers' found in so many books, and also warns us against exaggerating the significance of any one aspect.

At the end of *Roots and ramifications* Heiko Oberman looks forward to the Reformation of Calvin, who (he claims) reformed Europe 'from' Geneva, whereas Zwingli sought to reform Zürich, and only through his local failures spread his ideas abroad.[35] Oberman's more recent work has focused on Calvin, where an array of

[31] Oberman, *The Reformation: roots and ramifications*, pp. 94–103.

[32] The sermons are ed. in *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, x, pt iii, 1–64, and trans. in *Luther's works*, American Edition (Philadelphia and St Louis, 1955–), li, 69–100.

[33] Luther's *Catechisms* are ed. in *Die Bekenntnisschriften des evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr des Augsburgischen Konfession 1930* (Göttingen, 1930, and repr. most recently 1986), pp. 500–41, 545–73.

[34] On Luther's abandonment of preaching in 1529–30 see Brecht, *Luther: shaping and defining*, pp. 433ff.

[35] Oberman, *The Reformation: roots and ramifications*, pp. 214ff, and cf. p. 199.

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scholars will, no doubt, find their preconceptions challenged as those of the Luther biographers have been. T. H. L. Parker has held a lease on textual studies in Calvin's works for many years. He has written one of the standard biographical introductions; he has recently described in detail the editorial work involved in re-constituting the surviving sermons;[36] and in the last two works reviewed here, offers a second edition of his 1971 work on the New Testament commentaries, together with a re-printing of the very different discussion of the Old Testament commentaries dating from 1986.

Calvin saw it as the theologian's task to introduce his readers to Scripture. In the age before critical liberalism, it was not his task to evaluate the divine text, to discuss its accuracy or second-guess its teaching. Dr Parker, it would appear, adopts a somewhat equivalent attitude to John Calvin. His studies introduce the text of Calvin's works. They help the reader to learn whence the original writings or speech arose, how the text was composed and assembled, and how it has since been edited. Parker insists that one cannot find everything one needs to know about Calvin in the *Institutes*, because Calvin himself saw the *Commentaries* as complementary to the *Institutes* in presenting the teachings of Scripture. Is the point here to understand the Bible, or to evaluate Calvin? The question is never really put in this form, perhaps because Parker, like Calvin, does not see any difference between these aims.[37]

T. H. L. Parker's self-effacing view of the role of the theological historian goes some way to explain, though it cannot fully justify, the quantity of superfluous erudition which clogs up the text of these two introductions to the *Commentaries*. On the Old Testament commentaries, we are shown a week-by-week reconstruction of the timetable of Calvin's lectures in the Academy, as well as an estimate of the words delivered per hour.[38] Calvin's setting-out of the politico-legal provisions of the Mosaic code is summarized in detail, without any clear historical conclusion being drawn.[39] Far more technical, and even more utterly devoid of wider historical purport, is the discussion of the enlargement of the *Romans* and *Hebrews* commentaries in 1551 and 1556 (complete with discussion of misprints) where, as Parker himself says, no change took place in the substance of the argument.[40] This meticulous textual glossing is appropriate to a scholarly edition, such as those upon which Parker himself has worked; it does not belong in a monograph.

Important issues in the history of scriptural exegesis arise regarding Calvin's work. Calvin objected to excessive or spurious allegorizing of Old Testament passages, such as had been fashionable in the patristic and early medieval periods. He was criticized by others in turn for an overly literal study of the Old Testament: the label 'Judaizer' was unfairly waved in his direction. The sixteenth-century context is crucial here. Renaissance exegesis, from Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples onwards, discarded the 'quadriga' or fanciful fourfold interpretations, but insisted that there was a 'literal-prophetic' sense to the Old Testament: that it 'literally' foretold the coming of Christ. Dr Parker handles this crucial issue in a less than satisfactory manner. In *Old Testament commentaries* he discusses Calvin's use of the prophetic sense to interpret Old Testament texts as foreshadowing Christ, but gives no idea that this was, in fact, normal contemporary practice.[41] In an interpolation in the second edition of *New Testament*

[36] T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: a biography* (London, 1975), and *Calvin's preaching* (Edinburgh, 1992).
[37] Parker, *Calvin's New Testament commentaries*, pp. 6–7, and cf. p. 90.
[38] Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament commentaries*, pp. 13–29.
[39] Ibid. pp. 159ff.
[40] Parker, *Calvin's New Testament commentaries*, pp. 36–59; compare other technical apparatus, especially abundant in the *New Testament* volume, e.g. on pp. 56–9, 137ff, 194ff.
[41] Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament commentaries*, pp. 72ff.

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commentaries, he returns to the theme, this time aware of the scholarly discussion, but insists that Calvin's 'literalism' was somehow different from that of Nicholas of Lyra, Lefevre, or Erasmus.[42] However, how the 'literal' and the 'prophetic' interpretations inter-relate, and how Calvin compares here with his fellow-reformers, is not explored. One feels that the discussion of 'anagoge', of typological interpretation, has been revised after the event to justify the claim that Calvin was unique, not to compare him realistically with the sixteenth-century context. At the very least the *Old Testament* book ought also to have been revised before re-printing, since the only comparative discussion of typology appears where it is really least appropriate, in the *New Testament commentaries*.

This issue is not only important for itself; it also shows Dr Parker's priorities. Textual minutiae are explored to the last degree; important comparative issues are handled much less thoroughly. True, the discussion of the structure of Melanchthon's, Bullinger's and Bucer's commentaries in *New Testament commentaries* contrasts the topic-based approach (which Calvin confined to the *Institutes*) with a continuous running exposition; it shows how Bucer combined the two techniques, with dreadfully prolix results.[43] Here, though, we are concerned only with form, not content. Other opportunities to compare Calvin with his contemporaries are missed. 'A close examination of his character studies *would probably reveal* that he was much indebted to Erasmus's *Adagia* and the ethical treatises of Aristotle and Plutarch'.[44] Even where Parker has studied the commentaries of seven other protestant theologians, he has done so only to work out which Latin texts of the New Testament they used.[45] It is not that he knows only Calvin; it is that he only *wants* to know Calvin. Calvin is not even compared with Calvin, where, for instance, the exposition of the Decalogue invites comparison with the *Catechisms*.[46]

Yet Dr Parker is a very effective presenter of Calvin's ideas. There is nothing wayward or irresponsible about the summaries and paraphrases which he presents; they breathe the same matter-of-fact good sense as Calvin's own writing. When he unbends enough to say that 'the Calvin we encounter … is a bundle of contradictions. He will say the loveliest and the ugliest things … he can be highly subtle … and unbelievably naive',[47] one glimpses a freer, more creative commentator on Calvin, whom the editorial super-ego has repressed. The discussion of what Calvin meant by 'literal inspiration' offers a masterpiece of sympathetic understanding. Calvin distinguished between substantial inspiration versus verbal 'dictation': God spoke, but through the mind, the language, the authentic personality of the prophet or apostle. Even here, though, Parker might usefully have added that this view shaped protestant exegesis for three centuries, culminating in theologians of the 'Old Princeton School' such as A. A. Hodge (1823–1886).[48]

Three different images of three different religious leaders have been described here: a Müntzer who taught impressionistic, imprecise ideas dangerously detached from the

[42] Parker, *Calvin's New Testament commentaries*, pp. 100–5; for further discussion of sixteenth-century exegesis see H. A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: the shape of late medieval thought* (Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 281–315; A. E. McGrath, *The intellectual origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 152–74.

[43] Parker, *Calvin's New Testament commentaries*, pp. 60–84.

[44] Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament commentaries*, p. 104.

[45] Parker, *Calvin's New Testament commentaries*, p. 184.

[46] Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament commentaries*, pp. 130ff, 156ff.

[47] Ibid. p. 7.

[48] Compare A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of theology* (repr. Grand Rapids, 1948), pp. 66–9.

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theological mainstream which he despised; a Luther whose brilliance and creativity saw everything in his mental world differently from those around him; a Calvin whose self-effacing, methodical approach to the supreme text ensured that his own personality was always subdued. It is not difficult to detect the input of the biographer into the image of his hero; nor need one suppose that the influences run only in one direction. If these portraits betray here and there the features of the painter, they also show how long sympathetic study of his subject has formed the artist's mind. Of course, there are many other potential Müntzers, Calvins, and (especially) Luthers. Theological history may have to be 'the essence of innumerable biographies'. However, something necessary to the historian may be missed in this one-to-one dialogue of biographer and subject. The reformers made their mark on history by their interaction with their colleagues, their students, their congregations. Luther's life makes little sense apart from the restraining hand of Melanchthon. The respect which Calvin enjoyed can best be explained by his self-giving to students, fellow-pastors, and his vast array of correspondents. Müntzer cannot be understood at all apart from his utter failure to find kindred spirits. The key to the Reformation is not so much individual minds, communing with other minds across centuries, as milieux, faculties, groups of friends, congregations. None of us would pretend to be unmoved movers, immune to the influences of our colleagues; yet we seem all too ready to attribute such eminence routinely to our elders.

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