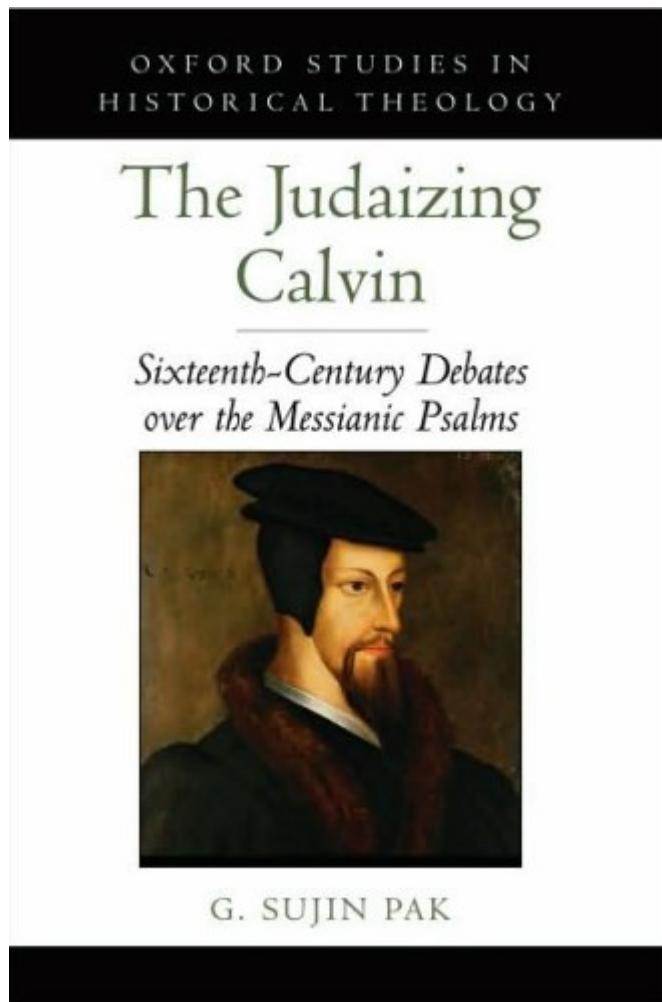


A review of The Judaizing Calvin

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Judaizing Calvin

By G. Sujin Pak
Oxford University Press

The accepted baseline for study of the Psalms is genre analysis. Beyond that baseline, however, several interpretive options are available. Most often critical

scholars seek to locate a particular Psalm in the life setting of ancient Israel, very often in a liturgical context. But two other alternatives are popularly practiced. On the one hand, "canonical interpretation" of the Psalter seeks to show how the various Psalms in the book are strategically situated, so that the shape of the Psalter in its several subsections is itself a theological, interpretive statement. On the other hand, there is a long tradition of Christian reading of the Psalms that takes Christ as their speaker or subject.

The Judaizing Calvin is a historical investigation of that latter practice among the 16th-century Reformers. Sujin Pak sees the Reformers as situated in a continuing line of christological interpretation that runs from Augustine to Bonhoeffer—an approach recently championed by Jason Byassee in *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine*.

Pak's book is the outcome of his Duke Divinity School dissertation, edited by David Steinmetz. It bears some of the marks of a dissertation: it is dense and its rhetoric is fairly flat. It is not an exciting read, but it is a serious and important read because it plunges us into the difficult question of how the church is to read the Old Testament. The book is organized around the question of how "Messianic Psalms" were read in the Reformation. The focus is on Psalms 2, 8, 16, 22, 45, 72, 110 and 118, a group that roughly corresponds to what critical scholars now term "royal Psalms"—that is, they are Psalms that speak of the king in ancient Israel. The question for interpretation is, "Who is the king?" Critical study takes him to be a Davidic king in Jerusalem; christological readings pass over such historical reference and read *king* as "Christ."

Pak begins with a quick review of three medieval interpreters, all of whom read these Psalms christologically. It is evident that the 16th-century Reformers inherited such an interpretive practice and to a great extent continued it. Pak proposes a taxonomy that traces the interpretive practices of Martin Luther, Martin Bucer and John Calvin in order to argue that in sequence the three Reformers moved progressively away from a direct christological reading toward a more historical reading. As a consequence Calvin emerges as the bold practitioner of a new hermeneutic, whereas Luther continued the medieval practice and Bucer (as usual) was a mediating figure, less committed to a christological reading than Luther, more so than Calvin.

It is not surprising that Luther read the Psalms according to his programmatic issues of spirit versus letter, law versus Gospel, flesh versus spirit and eventually visible versus invisible. Of course, Luther found through his study of the Psalms his great theme of justification by faith, so he read the Psalms with reference to the justifying work of Christ. But when Luther radically broke with medieval theology, he did not break with the christological interpretation of his antecedents.

Of special interest is Luther's vigorous polemic against "the Jews" as the exemplar "enemies of Christ." About this Pak draws two conclusions. First, Luther used "the Jews" as code language for attacking Roman Catholics who depended on their own righteousness and were ignorant of true worship; he found obvious parallels between Jews and Catholics. Second, Luther was fundamentally a pastor, so he found in these Psalms the comfort and consolation of the gospel for the church.

As usual, Bucer tends to get lost in a mediating position. He continued, by way of typology, to find in the Psalms a foreshadowing of Christ's kingdom, literal prophecies of Christ and much about the lived experience of the church. What was new in Bucer, however, was his fine capacity for the use of Hebrew and consequently his engagement with Jewish interpreters, notably Kimhi, Ibn Ezra and Rashi. This does not mean that he conceded anything of gospel claims, but his engagement with Jewish interpretation began to open up new interpretive possibilities so that the plain sense of the text shifted to some extent.

Pak is most occupied with Calvin, however, and with good reason. Calvin continued to read, as might be expected in his context, as an aggressive Christian interpreter. But he thought much more critically about interpretive principles that were historically informed. He dared to view David—the voice of the Psalms—as "a superlative teacher of theology and doctrine" and began to open the possibility of letting the Old Testament be heard as a voice of Jewish faith that is nonetheless a faithful witness to the truth of the gospel.

The measure of Calvin's daring interpretive departure is evident in the storm of controversy he evoked. Calvin was charged with an attempt to Judaize the Psalter—that is, to give it back to the Jews. Derivatively he was accused of Arianism—of compromising the high christological claims that had been found in the Psalter. Interpreters subsequent to Calvin continued to dispute the implications of his daring work.

Pak suggests a tension among Reformation interpreters between the "Wittenberg School," which practiced "literal-prophetic" interpretation, and the "Basel-Strasbourg-Zurich School," which championed "historical typology." The latter was not, Pak judges, a direct move to historical critical reading, but it surely was an opening beyond simplistic supersessionism because Calvin accepted that a Jew, David, was a reliable teacher of the church.

Pak draws three conclusions from this study: first, that Calvin has important implications for Jewish-Christian relations, even though he was a child of his time and continued polemics against "the Jews"; second, that Calvin allowed for the human author's "authorial intent" and so shifted the meaning of *literal sense*; and third, that Calvin foreshadowed historical interpretation, even though he did not go very far in that direction and was by no means doing historical criticism.

I wish this important book offered more specific textual study. Clearly the challenge of Jewish-Christian reading and the continued seduction of supersessionism matter enormously. Beyond that, much church use of the Psalter strikes me as thoughtless and lacking in intentionality. Pak suggests that as we chant or say or sing we might think that we are being instructed in faith by Jews—or alternatively that we stand alongside Jews in affirming a world occupied by the God who hears and answers, who upholds, judges and transforms. That occupation of the world makes possible (and mandates?) exuberant praise and honest complaint, both of which are subversions of the reductionism of today's technological society.

Pak shows that we are not the first who struggled to see what we are doing in such actions. But because the issue was not finished in the 16th century, we have work to do in being honest about our singing and praying, which we do better alongside Jews than over against Jews.