



The use of 'example' in Calvin's sermons on Job

During the academic year 1945-46 Professor Kamphuis and the writer of this article were students of Professor B. Holwerda, who had then just been appointed to the Chair of Old Testament at the 'Theologische Hogeschool' in Kampen. We both benefited from the rich insights which this gifted man of God passed on to his students.

By the time I first made contact with Holwerda, he was already known for his thorough knowledge of the Old Testament and of the contemporary literature written on the subject. A particularly significant publication of his was his lecture on 'The Redemptive History in Preaching,' first published in 1942.¹ In this lecture, Holwerda raised most incisively the question of how to preach from the narrative portions of the Old Testament. Rejecting the 'exemplaric' method, he insisted that those portions should be treated sermonically from the point of view of redemptive history. Not man and his or her subjective experiences should be the measure, but God and his great acts of redemption accomplished in the life and history of Israel his chosen people.

An extensive discussion in the church press of the Netherlands had already ensued by the time Professor Holwerda assumed his teaching duties. It continued subsequently.² In a study, originally presented as a dissertation for the doctor's degree at the Free University of Amsterdam, Dr. Sidney Greijdanus has served the English speaking world well by presenting a summary and a critique of that lively debate.³

Because of the great significance of Holwerda's opinions in this crucial area of preaching,⁴ opinions with which over the years I have sought to acquaint my own students as well, I have chosen to examine what the great Reformer of Geneva did with his use of 'example' in his sermons on Job. Since Calvin's method of sermonizing was sometimes an element in the discussion between Holwerda and those who disagree with him it would seem fitting to examine Calvin's use of the word 'example' a bit more closely.⁵

The choice of Calvin's sermons on Job might at first seem less appropriate since Holwerda's concern was primarily with the 'historical texts.' The book of Job is not ordinarily thought of as providing a good instance of such materials. Nevertheless, I believe there are good reasons for using these sermons as a testing ground of what Calvin means with the word 'example.' In the first place, the book of Job does present its materials within a framework which seems to bear the stamp of genuine history. Granted, the details are not always so precise as one might wish. When and where exactly the events described took place continues to be a matter of debate.⁶ Yet, the present writer sees no reason to depart from what other Reformed expositors have held with respect to the genuine historicity of the person of Job and therefore also of the events described in the book that bears his name.⁷

On the other hand, it may be granted that the general problem with which the book of Job deals cannot be fitted directly into the flow of redemptive history as that is the case with books such as Joshua through Kings. But this may be all the more a reason for examining how Calvin uses the word 'example' in his explication and application of this kind of book. If, as will become clear from the instances cited, Calvin even in a book such as Job shows an awareness of the 'already-not yet' dimension applicable to the relation between the Testaments, how much the more must one allow for this dimension when Calvin treats the historical books proper.

Calvin preached no less than 159 sermons on the book of Job. These sermons were delivered in the years 1554 and 1555, the beginning date being February 26, 1554. On March 20, 1555 Calvin

began his series of 200 sermons on the Book of Deuteronomy.⁸ Calvin's sermonic method was that of the homily. His sermons were running commentaries on a given text, interspersed with applicatory remarks. They did not center on a single theme developed synthetically.

Calvin's sermons on Job were very popular. Leroy Nixon, the translator of a number of them says: *"Of all the sermons by Calvin, the 159 on the book of Job have probably been the most famous."*⁹ In his preface to the Latin edition of the sermons on Job, Theodore Beza informs us that these sermons were read widely in the churches in France who were without a pastor as well as in the family setting. Admiral de Coligny read daily in them, both morning and evening.¹⁰

Turning now to the subject matter of the present inquiry, it cannot be denied that the general approach taken by Calvin to the history of Job and his friends is that this history teaches us, i.e. the New Testament readers, various important lessons and that these lessons are gathered by means of the example method. The story of Job, thus Calvin, *"shows us how we are in the hand of God, and that it belongs to Him to order our lives and to dispose of them according to His good pleasure."*¹¹ It also teaches us humility and obedience and the duty to glorify God always, confessing that He is just and equitable.

In developing this approach to the book Calvin often uses the word 'example,' occasionally also the word 'mirror.' Appealing to no less an authority than Saint James (5:11),

Calvin remarks that *"it is good that we have examples who show us that there are men frail like us, who nevertheless have resisted temptations, and have persevered in obeying God, although He afflicted them to the limit."*¹²

In his sermon on Job 1:20-22 Calvin enters into a discussion of the biblical notion of 'patience.' To understand this notion properly, thus Calvin, *"there is nothing better nor more useful than to behold the mirror which is here held up to us."*¹³

Calvin uses the word 'example' also in connection with Job's friends. Their example teaches us in the first place modesty.¹⁴ It is obvious at this point that Calvin does not mean to hold up the good example of the friends, but their bad example, which showed a lack of modesty. Thus by contrast, we are taught to be modest, when comparing ourselves with Job's friends.

What should be kept in mind, however, is that Calvin does not use the word 'example' in a strictly uniform way. Not always does the word connote the idea of moral example to be either followed or shunned, whatever the particular case maybe. Speaking of Elihu, for whose words Calvin has a great deal of sympathy, the Reformer states that *"we see in this example of the person of Elihu that God has yet left some good seed ("quelque bonne semence") in the midst of shadows ("tenebres"), and that there was some good and holy doctrine"*.¹⁵ By this is meant that Elihu, and in a lesser sense also his friends, but more so Job himself, are representatives of those who, while living in the midst of a pagan environment, show nevertheless either by their actions or their words, or by both, that there are remnants of truth among the pagans of Job's day. Here, then, clearly the word 'example' is not used primarily in the sense of moral example, but rather in the sense of 'instance'; 'illustration' of a larger truth.

At the same time — and this leads us to a crucial point in our inquiry — the fact that there are these 'examples' in the sense just described, also prompts Calvin to say more than once that as mere moral examples Job and his friends occupy a place quite different from the readers of the book, both Jewish and Christian.

As to the Jewish readers under the old dispensation, Calvin makes it clear that in the person of Job the Jews could see clearly — and this was the 'use' of the book 'dictated' by the Holy Spirit — that

*"God has had a people who have served Him, although they were not separated from the rest of the world, and although they had not the sign of circumcision."*¹⁶ Thus Job, by *"the intention of the Holy Spirit,"* serves the Jews as a *"mirror and pattern"* ("patron") *"to recognize how they had to observe the doctrine of salvation which was given them, since this man who was of a foreign nation had so preserved himself in such purity."*¹⁷

In other words, Calvin's use of 'example' bears the stamp of a redemptive-historical awareness. And that in the exposition of a book, which does not lend itself all that readily to the redemptive-historical perspective. Nevertheless, Calvin is constantly aware, and he also tries to make his audience aware of the fact that there is a distance between the 'example' of Job and the later readers of the book. If any example is to be gained from the book it will have to be done by means of an awareness of 'less' and 'more' in God's dispensation of grace. This, in effect, radically affects the use of 'example' in this series of sermons.

When Holwerda engaged in a discussion with those who, "*walking in the footsteps of Calvin*" do not object to an "*historical equation mark*" between the Biblical stories and the New Testament congregation¹⁸ he might have considered more closely how Calvin actually uses the example method and how not. One certainly cannot say that Calvin is simply placing Job and his friends on the same historical level as that of the later Jewish and Christian readers.

Not only did Calvin mark the difference between Job on the one hand and the *Jewish* recipients of the covenant of grace on the other, he also speaks repeatedly of the distance which separates *Christians* from people like Job. This, of course, is not surprising, for Calvin considers the New Testament period to be a continuation and at the same time an enrichment of the Old Testament period.

Speaking on Job 42:6, where Job says that he repents in dust and ashes, Calvin remarks that Job spoke thusly even though he was never part of the Church of God, of that body which was chosen from the lineage of Abraham.

If a man like Job was able to speak of true repentance, "*what condemnation will there be on us, if today we shall be so brutish and so rude that we will not be able to distinguish between the principles of the faith.*"¹⁹

Is it not clear that Calvin uses the story of Job *not* in order to simply equate Job's situation with that of his Christian hearers, much less to hold up Job as only a moral example, but rather to make the congregation in Geneva aware of the need for greater zeal and greater integrity than Job possessed in his day? Whatever example element Calvin finds in the life and words of Job and his friends, it becomes a part of larger framework. Calvin notes that Job and his friends, though living in a pagan setting and outside the covenant, have yet so much of the truth of God. Whatever we may learn from them must therefore be seen in the light of the scheme of the 'less-more' of which we spoke earlier.

Many more instances can be added to what already has been given. When Job says that his eyes will contemplate God and none other (Job 19:27) Calvin observes that as we "*make the comparison between Job and us*" we should remember that Job said this "*not having such a testimony of the goodness of God, nor having a doctrine one one-hundredth as familiar as we have.*"²⁰ And then he asks the pointed question of his Christian hearers:

*"And we, shall we be **excused** when we shall have gone astray this way and that way, indeed, after our Lord Jesus Christ presents Himself to us, in Whom dwells all fullness of divine glory...?"*²¹

Another excellent illustration of how Calvin sees the relation between Job and the Christian believers of Calvin's own day occurs in the last sermon in the series, dealing with Job 42:9-17. Here the book of Job informs us of the great material blessings which God gives to Job in return for his earlier suffering. Calvin's discussion of this passage is a masterpiece of biblical theological awareness of the relation between the two Testaments.

The Reformer acknowledges the many earthly blessings which the Old Testament believers received and he warns his hearers not to be upset if they today do not receive the same. In fact he tells them that their condition is not worse than that of the ancient fathers, *rather "we have a much better recompense which must comfort us."*²² Take, for instance, what God says about the long life which He gives to the believers. Not only does Calvin recognize that also non-believers have lived

long; he also notes the relative imperfection of the hope which the ancient fathers possessed. These fathers did not yet know as perfectly as we that God had prepared their inheritance in heaven. Of this inheritance they only had some taste (quelque goust).

Calvin shows a marvelous balance at this point. On the one hand he acknowledges that the ancient fathers and we "*have a common faith.*" This had to be said, already in Calvin's day, against those who like the Socinians held an inferior opinion concerning the spirituality of the Old Testament. Still Calvin rightly reminds his audience that these fathers did not have such a 'declaration' of the 'common faith' as has since been given to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the long life which they enjoyed is the 'shadow,' of which we today have the 'body' in our Lord Jesus Christ.²³

One could multiply the illustration of how Calvin seeks to make the book of Job — a book which he holds to come first of all from a pagan setting, and which he further recognizes to be an Old Testament book — applicable to his Christian audience. Of great importance is what Calvin says about the prayer which Job is to offer up on behalf of his friends and also about the sacrifices which these friends are instructed to bring for themselves. Not only does this discussion show once again Calvin's awareness of 'comparative religion' as it was known in his day, it also contains another reminder of the 'less-more' dimension which he has mentioned so often throughout these sermons.²⁴

As to sacrifices brought by pagans, Calvin reminds his audience that the whole world knows that sins must be effaced by recompense. But then he moves on from there by stating that while the pagans have not understood the purpose why they bring their sacrifices so that these are simply a testimony against them (seulement un tesmoignage contr'eux), we on the other hand have the truth of this revealed to us in the gospel.²⁵ It is true, God has never received men in mercy except with sacrifices. But so much the less excusable are we today, after Jesus Christ has suffered and died, if we should think to be absolved by any other means except by the purification which has been made.²⁶

Not only does Calvin use this argument of the 'less' and the 'more' in a hortatory sense, he also uses it to encourage the doubtful. If God showed his pity to those who offended him in the time of the shadows and the figures of the 'Law', yes if He has even extended his mercy to those who were not of the body of his people (i.e. Job's friends), *let us not doubt* that the Lord will receive us, now that the Gospel is proclaimed through the whole world and God has made a "*common covenant with Pagans and Jews,*" the middle wall of partition being no longer.²⁷

Similar things are said about the prayer which Job is to offer on behalf of his friends. Job belongs to those to whom God had not revealed himself specially (*privement*), yet his prayer is full of intercessory power. How much more will this be the case today, now that we have the full declaration that Jesus Christ is the only Advocate who intercedes for us.

I believe that enough has been said to indicate that when Job's example is held up to the believers of Calvin's day this is not done simply by means of an "*historical equation mark.*"

There are indeed times when Calvin uses the example method simply on the basis of the common humanity which unites Job with us. Speaking of the fact that sometimes the good do suffer Calvin reminds his congregation that there is a certain way in which Job's suffering is just the suffering of a man, a human being. This is why a sufferer cannot say: But I am only human; how then can I be made to suffer so much? At this point Calvin raises a few rhetorical questions: "*Job n'estoit-il pas homme? Abraham n'estoit-il pas homme? David aussi bien? Et comment est-ce qu'ils ont résisté aux tentations?*"²⁸ The present writer believes that in this very general way such use of "*the suffering of mankind*" as exemplified in the Bible can be justified. Not in order to combine the two methods, but rather to furnish illustrations gathered from Scripture concerning some generally experienced reality in the Christian's life. It is Calvin's conviction that when God says to these individual believers in their suffering that He will be their refuge and that He will help them in all their needs, he has not only spoken to Job, Abraham or David. "*Has he not spoken to his whole church?*"

It is apparent that Calvin is far removed from just an individualistic example method, even in such cases as just described. These ancient saints who were helped in their suffering were part of the *church of God*.

In his discussion of the debate surrounding Holwerda's lectures Sidney Greijdanus has raised some worthwhile points. He has pointed out rightly so I believe — that the redemptive-historical approach as then practiced was perhaps too fact-oriented and not enough Scripture-oriented.²⁹

The scope of the present study does not permit a further discussion of this matter. Elsewhere I have sought to demonstrate that Calvin already in his day showed a wholesome awareness of commenting on *Scripture* rather than on events only. In his commentary on Joshua the Reformer sometimes refers to the *autor libri* as the one whose intention he is interested in expounding. Thus it would seem that Calvin makes a distinction between the author and the events reported by the author.

One may also raise the question whether Calvin's pervasive concern to find the 'doctrina' of a given passage, be that historical or otherwise, is not as such a step in the right direction. The word *doctrina* in Calvin does not always have the meaning of a fully worked out tenet of the faith. Its sense is the original one of 'teaching' (from *docere* = to teach). By focusing on this *doctrina* Calvin helps to see a given passage treated.³⁰ This could add a further dimension to Calvin's use of the word 'example' in his sermons and commentaries.

In conclusion, Calvin's use of the word 'example' in his sermons on Job is a rather complex one. Even in his treatment of a book such as Job Calvin shows an awareness of the difference between Old and New Testament, as well as giving us some insight into his understanding of how we must relate the "*seed of religion*" in a pagan environment to the teachings of special revelation. All this leads me to think that when Calvin uses the "*example method*" he may have been closer to what Professor Holwerda meant by redemptive-historical preaching than has sometimes been recognized.

MH Woudstra

© 2016

www.christianstudylibrary.org

¹ Cf. *GTT* 43 (1942), 381-403. Subsequently the lecture was republished in B. Holwerda, "*...Begonnen hebbende van Mozes...*," Terneuzen 1953, 79-118.

² Holwerda had given this lecture also in 1940 and 1941. This allowed him in the 1942 version of the lecture to refer to some of the things his critics had said.

³ Cf. S. Greijdanus, *Sola Scriptura – Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*, Kampen 1970, recently reprinted.

⁴ Also in South Africa Holwerda's position on redemptive-history in preaching is known. For a recent reference see D.H.Odendaal, "Die blijwende betekenis van die Ou Testament vir die kerk," in *Die Ou Testament Vandag* (eds. D.H. Odendaal, B.A. Muller and H.J.B. Combrink), University of Stellenbosch, 1979, 16.

⁵ For Holwerda's reference to Calvin cf. "De Heilshistorie..," op. cit., 79, 85. Various studies on Calvin's method preaching have been published over the years. We mention the following: T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God, An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (London and Redhill: Lutterworth Press, 1947); Carl G. Kromminga, *Man Before God in Calvin's Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1961); cf. also the earlier work by one of the former professors of the Hogeschool in Kampen: P. Biesterveld, *Calvijn als Bedienaar des Woords* (Kampen 1897) containing several references to Calvin's sermons on Job, and also some earlier literature on Calvin as a preacher. For Calvin's use of 'example' in one of the 'historical' books, cf. also M.H. Woudstra, *Calvin's Dying Bequest to the Church, A Critical Evaluation of the Commentary on Joshua* (Grand Rapids, Calvin Theol. Seminary, 1960) esp. 21-24.

⁶ For some current positions on how to understand the question of Job's 'historicity' cf. B.A. Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1976), 391. See also Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1979), who believes that the evidence adduced in support of the various theories concerning the historicity of the book is "extremely meagre." See also his comments on Calvin's sermons on Job, with words of appreciation and of criticism. The conservative Gleason L. Archer, Jr. admits that the

period of the composition of Job is difficult to date with any precision. Leaving open the possibility of a pre-Mosaic date, Archer appears to favour a Solomonic date, and suggests that this would imply "a certain amount of artistic license in the literary form" (cf. *Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1979, 456-462). The Reformed scholar G. Ch. Aalders avoids suggesting any definite time of composition of the book, but denies the possibility of a post-exilic date (*Oud Testamentische Canoniek*, Kampen 1952, 302).

⁷ Both Aalders, op. cit., 302, and J.H. Kroeze, *Het Boek Job* (Kampen, Kok, 1960, 18), appeal to Ezek. 14:12-23 and James 5:11 to argue for the historicity of the person of Job. I believe this appeal is well taken.

⁸ For a brief but useful discussion of Calvin's sermonic method in general, the large number of sermons he preached, and the approach taken to the book of Job, see Harold Dekker's *Introduction to Sermons from Job*, translated by Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1979, ix-xxxvii). Nixon's translation is accurate and idiomatic. In this essay we shall use his translation when quoting from the sermons contained in the above volume. All of Calvin's sermons on Job, originally preached in French, are published in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ediderunt G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss, Brunsvigae, 1887, vols. 33-35. Quotations from sermons not found in Nixon's volume will be taken from the French original and translated by the writer, using the following abbreviated reference: C.O., vol. ..., p. ...

⁹ Op. cit., v.

¹⁰ See P. Biesterveld, op. cit., 37. A. Viguié, quoted by Biesterveld on p. 105, informs us that the deepest reason why these sermons were so well received lies "in the intensity of their piety." The sermons on Job stress God's absolute sovereignty and justice. Yet it is on that foundation that true piety can flourish. Viguié believes that the power and heroism of the people of the 16th century can only be explained in terms of a belief in that dogma.

¹¹ *sermons from Job*, op. cit., 3; C.O., Vol. 33, 21.

¹² Idem, 3f. Immediately following upon the part quoted above Calvin continues: "Or nous en avons ici un miroir excellent." It is evident that for Calvin the words 'example' and 'mirror' are virtually synonymous.

¹³ Cf. *Sermons from Job*, 19; C.O., Vol. 33, 93.

¹⁴ *Sermons*, 216; C.O., vol. 35, 3: "Voila donc comme a l'exemple des amis de job l'Esprit de Dieu nous advertit en premier lieu d'estre modestes."

¹⁵ *Sermons*, 217; C.O., Vol. 35, 4. See also Calvin's remarks on the same subject of the "seed of religion" as evidenced in Job and the friends, in the first sermon, *Sermons*, 7; C.O., Vol. 33, 25. Calvin regards Job to have been of Edomite descent. But though descended from the rejected Esau God had preserved him in integrity of life.

¹⁶ *Sermons*, 7; C.O., Vol. 33, 25.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ "De Heilshistorie," op. cit., 85.

¹⁹ C.O., Vol. 33, 489.

²⁰ *Sermons*, 127; C.O., Vol. 34, 133: "Or faisons nous tousiours ceste comparaison entre Job et nous, que si Job n'ayant point un tel tesmoignage de la bonté de Dieu, n'ayant point une doctrine si familiere de la centieme partie comme nous avons..."

²¹ Idem: "et nous, serons-nous á excuser ... voire attendu que nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ se presente á nous, auquel haite toute la plenitude de gloire divine...?"

²² C.O., Vol. 35, 512.

²³ Op. cit., 513.

²⁴ a. C.O., Vol. 35, 500 and 503. This is the last sermon in the entire series.

²⁵ Idem, 503.

²⁶ Idem, 500: "Et ainsi notons que tant moins sommes nous aujourd'huy excusables, apres que Iesus Christ a souffert mort et passion, si nous cuidons estre absous devant Dieu par autre moyen, que par ceste purgation qui a esté faite."

²⁷ Idem. See also what Calvin says in his sermon on Job 33:16 about the use of conscience among Pagans and Turks (Muslims), and the line which he then draws to what we have today in the law, the prophets and the revelation in Jesus Christ, C.O., Vol. 35, 74. Important is also what Calvin says about Elihu and the light of truth which he possesses, idem, 33, 35; *Sermons*, 238.

²⁸ C.O., Vol. 33, 83.

²⁹ Op. cit., esp. 174-233. There is truth to Greijdanus' remark that the difference between preaching a "historical text" and preaching a "dogmatic text" is not nearly as great as was often assumed in the controversy (p. 192).

³⁰ For further elucidation see M.H. Woudstra, op. cit., 13-15; cf. also C. Trimp, *Betwist Schriftgezag*, Groningen 1970, 159.