

Calvin on slavery: Providence and social ethics in the 16th century

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In this article, Calvin's views on slavery are evaluated within the broader historical context of the practice of slavery during the late Middle Ages and the 16th century, and also in the light of various views inherited from Greek and Roman antiquity. Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy, his commentary on Ephesians and 1 Timothy are particularly relevant to this study, as is his earlier commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*. Whilst it appears that the 16th century's context does not play a central role in Calvin's assessment of slavery, his exegesis of biblical texts leads him to articulate a strong position with regard to this anthropological and ethical issue, combining the notions of *imago Dei* [image of God], *humanitas* [humaneness], *providentia Dei* [providence of God] and analogical right.

Calvyn oor slawerny: Voorsienigheid en sosiale etiek in die 16de eeu. In hierdie artikel word Calvyn se siening van slawerny na waarde geskat binne die breër historiese konteks van slawerny-praktyke gedurende die laat-Middeleeue en die sestiende eeu, asook in die lig van verskeie beskouings geërf uit die Griekse en Romeinse Antieke. Calvyn se preke oor Deuteronomium, sy kommentaar op Efesiërs en 1 Timoteus is besonder relevant vir hierdie studie, soos ook sy vroeër kommentaar op Seneca se *De Clementia*. Hoewel dit blyk dat die sestiende eeuse konteks nie 'n sentrale rol in Calvyn se beoordeling van slawerny speel nie, lei sy eksegese van Bybeltekste hom daartoe om 'n sterk standpunt te artikuleer oor hierdie antropologiese en etiese kwessie deur die idees van die *imago Dei* [Beeld van God], *humanitas* [menslikheid], *providentia Dei* [God se voorsienigheid] en analogiese reg te kombineer.

... which cannot be done amidst the humanity which we keep among ourselves ... (Sermon XLVI on 1 Tim 6:1–2, CO 53, 546)

Introduction

The topic of this article, firstly presented as a research seminar in 2008, then as a paper delivered during an international congress on Calvin research in 2010, was triggered by a remarkable encounter which I made during a marathon trip undertaken between West Africa and North America in August 1999. At 04:00, shortly after boarding the plane heading towards New York from Dakar (Senegal) – I was quite tired after an already long and exhausting journey – I noticed a very talkative African lady heading towards the row where I had just settled, secretly hoping she would not sit next to me, and force me into all kinds of useless chatter which at that stage of the night I did not quite feel up to sustaining. She did sit next to me, though, and despite the best body language I could display to indicate that I was after peace and some sleep, she quickly engaged in a light conversation in such a compelling way that it was impossible to dodge it, lest I should appear very rude. This conversation turned out to be one of the most striking I have ever had with a fellow human being. Doctor Akosua Perbi, then lecturing at the Department of History at the University of Ghana, was on her way to New York to present some seminars on the topic of slavery and the triangular slave trade, mostly to Afro-American students. As she talked to me about her research and the negative reception she usually experienced when explaining to her Black American audience that Africans and Arabs bore just as much responsibility for the slave trade as Europeans did, I realised she was a devout Presbyterian herself, trying to make sense of these tragic historical matters from the perspective of her Christian faith. How could Western nations, calling themselves Christian, treat their fellow human beings in a way so contrary to the most basic ethical norms enshrined in the Gospel? What kind of ideology or philosophy could be at the root of it? How can one be an African Presbyterian today if that means associating oneself even to the least extent with such ideological baggage? I was already aware that during the 17th century Dutch Calvinists and French Catholics had no reservations about participating side by side in the Indian Ocean slave trade, notwithstanding that their two nations were simultaneously at war with each other in Europe. Evidently, economic and imperialistic interests superseded

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ethical imperatives, but there had to be something else too: a vision of mankind which – pre-Darwinian as it may be – was rooted in the concept of an inherent inequality between human beings, such that one group was entitled to treat the other as a mere commodity.

Today the issue of slavery is more than a distant historical phenomenon which prompts our collective memory and conscience to ask deep and searching questions. Never has the trade in human beings been so widespread in the world as it is nowadays. Women and girls in particular are targeted for the sake of sexual ‘tourism’, whilst boys are primarily compelled into forced labour. Organisations denouncing this curse provide alarming statistics (see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] n.d.). To remain on African soil: in 1981 the Islamic Republic of Mauritania officially forbade the practice of selling human beings with the purpose of reducing them into slavery, thus acknowledging a local culture of proslavery. The practice has continued unhindered, though, and the very first indictments in Mauritania took place only in 2011, pointing towards a perpetuation of this trade. I have recently been made aware by my fellow Christians in Mali of the stealing of children on the streets of Bamako. It is assumed that members of some northern tribes effect raids into the capital city to renew their stocks of human flesh, preying on unsuspecting children. The tragic fate of the Pygmies in Central Africa (particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) at the hands of Bantu populations has enjoyed international attention.

During that night of August 1999, above that same Atlantic Ocean which saw countless ships filled with African slaves leave the shores of West Africa and head towards the shores of the Americas, a seed had been planted in my mind by my talkative *neighbour*. Years later this seed would nurture a need to acquire a deeper understanding of the nature of relationships between *neighbours* from a Christian perspective, focusing on Calvin’s discussion of the practice of slavery in his sermons and commentaries.

Historical context of the question of slavery in Calvin’s day

Between the years 1550 and 1556, the book of Deuteronomy was being quoted and referred to in Western Europe in a broad variety of ways touching – sometimes in a peripheral manner – a subject which had acquired renewed relevance: slavery, its potential justification and its practice. Between Wednesday 20 March 1555 and Wednesday 15 July 1556 Calvin preached every second week exactly two hundred sermons on the book of Deuteronomy in *lectio continua* [continuous reading]. The topic of slavery appears there as the text of the day brings it forth, for instance in the sermon on Deuteronomy 11:22–25 (preached on Thursday 26 September 1555), 15:1–15 (Wednesday 30 October 1555) or 24:7–9 (Saturday 01 February 1556).

Meanwhile, a few hundred kilometres south of Geneva, during the famous disputation of Valladolid held in the year 1550 by order of Charles V, Doctor Juan Gines de Sepulveda

argued that the war being waged by the Spanish crown against the Amerindians in the name of the king and the holy Catholic faith of which he was the defender and sponsor was justified. His opponent, the Bishop of Chiapa Bartolome de Las Casas, argued that, on the contrary, the wars of conquest in the Indies could never be anything but unjust and tyrannical. Following the publication, two years later, of the transcripts of this disputation, which had been held publicly in the presence of numerous academics, theologians and jurists, Master Soto, presenting the opposing arguments, summarised Sepulveda’s position in the following way:

In summary Doctor Sepulveda based his opinion on four arguments. The first is the gravity of these peoples’ offenses, principally idolatry and their other sins against nature. The second is the dullness of their minds. By nature, they are servile and uncivilized and consequently obliged to serve those, like the Spanish,¹ whose wisdom renders them more sophisticated. The third is for the good of the faith, because this state of subjection renders preaching and persuasion easier and more expedient. The fourth is the injury that they inflict upon one another when they kill men in order to sacrifice them and, in certain cases, to eat them. He justified the first argument in three ways. First, by reference to the authorities and examples of Holy Scripture; second, by reference to the Masters and Doctors of the Canon Law; thirdly, by condemning the enormity of their offenses. With regard to the authorities of Holy Scripture, he did not rely upon all those which he quotes in his book, but just one or two. The first is Deuteronomy, chapter 20. He does not cite this passage to prove the legitimacy of the war, but to explain how it ought to be conducted, because it is stated therein: ‘When you approach a city to attack it, first offer to make peace. ...’ (Las Casas 2007; cf. Hanke 1974, regarding this controversy)

And thus did Master Soto continue his summary of the arguments advanced by Sepulveda, founded in part on Deuteronomy chapter 9 and chapter 12 and also on Leviticus (chapter 26). By means of these quotations and glosses advanced in support of a particular interpretation of the text, there emerges a legitimation of His Most Catholic Majesty’s war of conquest in the Indies, a legitimation which is based on a form of identification between the mission of the King of Spain in the service of Christendom and that of Israel during the conquest of Canaan; an identification and legitimation which is utterly denounced as erroneous and abusive by the Bishop of Chiapas, who, in support of his position, places reliance on Deuteronomy chapter 7 and chapter 9.²

If the question of slavery is, then, no more than peripheral to this debate (the primary concern of which it was the

1.The influence of Aristotle (in particular his *Politics*, or *La Politique*) is manifest here, even though Sepulveda does not militate in favour of the slavery of Indians: ‘The same rule must necessarily be applied to the whole of the human race; consequently, when men differ between themselves as much as a soul differs from a body and a man from a beast (and this inferior condition pertains to those whose labour consists only in the use of corporeal strength, besides that is the most one can get out of them) those are by nature slaves; it is better for them to be under the authority of a master (...) A slave is someone who by nature is fit to be someone else’s thing (actually that is why he is such a thing), and who possesses reason only inasmuch as it is involved in sensation, but without possessing it fully’ (Aristotle 1995:40–41).

2.In order to respond to this article, his lordship the bishop put forward many things which can be summarised in four points. Firstly, these wars against idolatrous Gentiles were not ordained because of their idolatry, but particularly against the Canaanites, Jebusites and the seven nations mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 7, who possessed the promised land. This land was promised to Abraham and his lineage even though God wanted at the same time to punish their idolatry. This proves the first point for if God had wanted to punish at the same time Gentiles only because of their idolatry, he should not have punished only these nations, but almost the whole earth, since it was full of idolatry. In order to substantiate this idea, the doctor quotes partially a proof text taken from Deuteronomy chapter 9, where both causes are given together’ (Las Casas 2007:209).

justification of a war whose purpose was to facilitate the subjugation of the Amerindians so as to introduce them to the Gospel), the historical context abundantly demonstrates that the issue of slavery was on the agenda of the day or, rather, of the century. One hundred years earlier, two bulls issued by Pope Nicholas V and addressed to King Alfonso V of Portugal (*Dum Diversas* – 18 June 1452 – and *Romanus Pontifex* – 05 January 1455) sanctioned the consignment to perpetual slavery of every Saracen or pagan population which the said king was to conquer, in addition to the appropriation of every land and domain of which he took possession. Several years later, in 1462, Pius II condemned the enslavement of the newly baptised in an address to the governors of the Canary Islands without calling into question the assumption of his predecessor's decree.

The ambiguity of the papacy's position regarding the question of slavery appears even more clearly when it found its direct interests at stake, as an incident between Pope Julius II (nicknamed 'The Warrior Pope') and the Venetians shows. In the heat of the political conflict with the republic of Venice regarding the control of the cities of Ravenna, Cervia, Faënza, and Rimini, Julius II edicted on 27 April 1509 (incidentally two-and-a-half months before the birth of John Calvin) a monition placing an interdict on the Venetians: listing the offences they had committed against the supreme pontiffs, this papal monition enjoined them to return within 24 days all stolen possessions and revenues drawn from them. In case of disobedience, Julius would declare them guilty of divine *lèse-majesté* [injured majesty], inviting all Christians to treat them as public enemies, to take possession of their properties, and to reduce them to slavery. This interdict was lifted shortly after the defeat of the Venetians against the so-called League of Cambrai (which included France and other allies of the Pope). A sudden reversal of political and military alliance led Julius II to place an interdict on France this time (Martin 1856:372–373).

In November 1526 the crown of Spain edicted ordinances on the fair treatment of Indians. The preamble mentions ill-treatments worse than those inflicted on slaves (Las Casas 2007:108).³ In June 1537, under the influence of the Dominican Bernardino de Minaya, the bull *Sublimus Dei* [From God on high] of Paul III unequivocally condemned the enslavement of the Indians and the spoliation of their goods, whether they were converts to Christianity or not. Every contrary act perpetrated by western colonists or soldiers would be considered null and devoid of papal authority.⁴ In August

3. The Crown declares that it has been informed that "due to the unbridled greed of some of our subjects [...] and some ill-treatments which they inflicted to the Indians [...] by having them working in an excessive and inordinate way, without clothing nor enough food to maintain them alive, treating them with hatred and cruelty, worse than if they were slaves, all this has been the cause of the death of a great number of Indians to such an extent that many islands and part of the dry land have become deserted. They are not inhabited by Indians who were the natives. It also caused others to flee [...] in the mountains to save their lives and escape the said subjection and ill-treatments, which also constituted a great obstacle to their conversion" (Las Casas 2007:108).

4. Here are the most significant excerpts of this bull: "The truth says: "Go and teach all men." It says: "all men, without any distinction for all men have received the capacity to receive the teachings of our faith." But the devil tempted some of his [God's] ministers who, wanting to satisfy their greed, dare to affirm in season and out of

1530, Charles V had banned slavery, even following a war considered just, or if slaves were bought from Indians (Las Casas 2007:295). Nevertheless, the same anti-slavery decree was abrogated in February 1534, on the pretext that it had fostered Indian resistance and caused the slaves whom the Indians themselves owned to be kept in idolatry, when they could otherwise have been converted as a result of being purchased by Christians. A letter of revocation (*Non Indecens Videtur*, 19 June 1538) was therefore obtained by Charles V from Paul III. For all that, however, the bull *Sublimus Deus* remained in force.

One will notice that all this decree-making concerns, first and foremost, two maritime powers – Spain and Portugal – both of which found themselves in the vanguard of the conquest of the Americas⁵ by the very nature of their geo-political situation. This was certainly not the case with all European nations, a fact which colours the attitude of any given country to the issue of slavery during the period in question. In the case of France, African slaves were not introduced into the French colonies until about 1620 (Régent 2007:9–10),⁶ more than three centuries after they had first been imported into Europe by Portuguese coastal shipping. Indeed, the enslavement of those captured in the Mediterranean or even further south was a common phenomenon in Medieval Europe:

During the Medieval period slavery remained largely confined to the Mediterranean countries, due to their ancient customs and their contact with the Islamic lands. Countries such as the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily based part of their economy, particularly mining and agriculture, on slave labour. Italy, Genoa and, above all, Venice had large slave markets. In Spain, Cordoba perpetuated the cottage industry tradition. (Dorigny & Gainot 2006:13)⁷

(footnote 4 continues...)

season that Indians from both Western and Southern territories and all people from the regions recently discovered must be reduced by force to our service and treated like wild animals, under the pretext that they are supposedly unfit to receive the Catholic faith. Trying to justify themselves on account of this so-called inability, they subject them to the worse servitude; they oppress and brutalise them to such an extent that the enslavement imposed to their animals is hardly more severe than the one imposed on these people. In consequence, We [...] who try with our all our heart to find his flock wandering outside of the fold in order to bring them back – for such is our mission –; knowing that Indians, being truly men, are not only capable to receive the faith in Christ, but rush to welcome it with all their will; [...] determine and declare that these Indians and anyone who would henceforth be discovered by Christians – although they live outside the faith in Christ – are not deprived of freedom and should not they be deprived of it, nor of sovereignty on their possessions' (Las Casas 2007:294).

5. By the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), these two nations had shared amongst themselves the exploitation of the Western territories (most of America being allotted to Spain) and of the East (Africa and Brazil being devolved upon Portugal).

6. Gorée Island, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Bourbon Island (*Reunion*), Ile de France (*Mauritius*), Louisiana, Marie-Galante, Martinique, New-France (*Nouvelle France*), Saint Barthélémy, Saint Christophe, Saint Croix, Saint Domingue, Saint-Louis du Sénégal, Saint Lucia, Saint Martin, Seychelles, Tobago: the common denominator between these territories is to have lived under a regime of slavery under French colonial rule (...). The subject-matter is considerable. Almost four million women, men and children were subjected to colonial slavery. Half of them were born in Africa, the other half in the colonies. They were called Creoles, a designation which they shared with White people born in the colonies who had the same language.

7. Venetians and Genoese having seized control of the antique slave trade routes of the Eastern Mediterranean sea, the trading posts were Kaffa, Latana, Cyprus, Crete. Slaves passing in transit were Russians, Circassians (valleys of the Caucasus east of the Black sea), Tartars (Middle Asian steppes). Slavic countries, especially Serbian populations, made up vast pools of young captives, the Slavonians. Inhabitants from Berbera (*Barbary coast*), Turks, Moors were sold in all important harbour centres. Africans, being in numbers in Palermo before 1450, came from the region of Bornou, around Lake Chad. Black slaves from the trans-Saharan trade route came to the Kingdom of Naples via Tripoli, Tunis and Cyrenaica. Catalans, Valencians, Majorcans and Genoese, being fierce corsairs, surrounded the borders of Muslim world from the Aegean sea to the Atlantic and brought back slaves from their raids against Muslim lands.

The pivotal role in the slave trade played by Portugal, and those who intervened on her behalf, began in the 15th century with the closure of the central Asian slave markets to European merchants, on account of the advancing Turks: the rise to prominence of the Island of São Tomé marks the beginning of a new stage in the growth of the slave trade (Dorigny & Gainot 2006:16); and this is clearly the context in which the two papal bulls of Nicholas V (1452 and 1455) must be read. As for Spain, it began to get involved after the conquest of the Canaries, when it started deporting the indigenous population from there to Andalusia (Dorigny & Gainot 2006:17).⁸

Similarly, the trading of Christians in the Mediterranean in order to supply the slave markets of Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli (the three cities which formed the hard core of what is now referred to as the Barbary Coast) is confirmed beginning in the 8th century:

However the peak of this aspect of the trade occurred between the beginning of the 16th century and the end of the 17th century, during which time more than one million Christians (90% of them men) were sold as slaves. During the course of the 18th century the number of those taken captive reduces in proportion to the diminishing power of the Ottoman Empire and the increased presence of western naval power in the Mediterranean, as few as 300,000 captives being snatched from Europe throughout that period. (Dorigny & Gainot 2006:11)

Different contexts in the writings of Calvin

Calvin's Geneva is located well outside the Mediterranean world concerned with the traffic of human beings, and this is the first factor one must bear in mind when gauging the position of Calvin on the question of slavery. In America, Las Casas had been directly confronted with the horrors of the treatment of Amerindians by Spanish colonisers. As a direct witness, he could call upon princes who tolerated such evils from their subjects. The situation was quite different from the shores of the lake of Geneva. In fact, nowhere in his sermons on Deuteronomy or, indeed, in his commentaries on the other biblical texts which mention slavery, does Calvin directly address this social and economic practice which was experiencing a clear resurgence in the nations of Southern Europe (the number of slaves arriving in America increased substantially in the years 1541–1545 and yet again in 1561–1565) (Dorigny & Gainot 2006:17).⁹ In his doctoral thesis written

8. Only Christians captured by Muslims during naval attacks are coming into account here. For a more thorough study on Muslim proslavery from Africa, cf. Heers (2003). In the section of his book dealing with the depopulation of Africa, Heers (*ibid*:255) writes: 'For a long time it was customary, and still is, to maintain that slavery was the only responsible factor for Africa's depopulation and economic backwardness. It led many to point an accuser finger at Europeans (in particular, French and English) during the time of the triangular trade trips and to charge them, and only them, with all possible evils. In the meantime, slavery practices by Muslims was brought to nothing, or at least much less than what it actually was. Never would one admit that the number of victims of Islamic slave trade was in total superior to the number of slaves sold to Christians.'

9. In relation to the years 1536–1540 the number of individuals concerned by these arrivals is multiplied by four during the first period mentioned, totalling about 12 500 people. It is multiplied by six during the second period indicated (1561–1556) compared to the five previous years, reaching a record figure of more than 16 000 people.

more than 50 years ago, A. Biéler (1959) became interested in Calvin's writings on slavery. He states:

It is impossible that Calvin, a man well informed regarding all the principal events of his day, had no knowledge of at least some of these facts. Granted, he was preoccupied, we know, with so many other problems, whether in relation to doctrine or the issues of daily life with which he interacts. Nevertheless, he did not fail to address the problem of slavery in the course of his teaching. (Biéler 1959:171)¹⁰

If, however, Calvin did not seem to have been aware of the slave trade from Europe to America (at least he does not mention it), he was not unaware of the fact that taking captives and selling them as slaves was practised by Spaniards in his own lifetime. At least two passages taken from his writings attest to this:¹¹ one comes from his sermon on Genesis 12:4–7 (Calvin 2000:601),¹² the other from his commentary on Jeremiah 34:8–17.¹³

True as this may be, the absence of texts which make explicit reference to contemporary events does not rule out an indirect approach, based on texts which deal with the question of slavery in various different contexts, each of which is explicit in respect of the context to which it relates. Four contexts stand out from the rest in the writings of Calvin:

- The practice of slavery in the Old Testament, notably amongst the Hebrews, a practice very carefully regulated by Mosaic law.
- The situation in the ancient world, including New Testament texts on the question.
- Medieval serfdom in Western Europe.
- The situation on the Barbary Coast and in the Orient.

Calvin's correspondence concerning the expedition of Villegagnon and his companions to Brazil (written between 1556 and 1558) makes no reference to matters pertaining to slavery (CO 16–17 [CO refers to Calvin's Opera Omnia/Corpus Reformatorum, see Calvin {1531–1564} 1863–1900). The truth is that the economic exploitation of the territories then referred to as *Antarctic Gaul* was hardly the primary aim of this missionary expedition, which was funded by Geneva and ended in failure. Furthermore, the Topinambou Indians

10. In the light of more recent research, Biéler (1959:170) seems quite optimistic when he writes: 'Since the 10th century, Western countries stopped practicing slave trade, although the latter remained very lucrative in the Muslim world.' Still, Calvin's texts are numerous and explicit enough, as we shall now see, to dismiss completely the rash affirmation by Christian Delacampagne (2002:192) according to which Calvin – no more, he states, than Luther, the Humanists, philosophers or jurists from the 17th century – nowhere criticises the practice of slavery by denouncing the horror of such a human condition.

11. I am grateful to M. Engammare to have pointed them to me, from his critical edition of Calvin's sermons on Genesis, more precisely sermon 54 on Genesis 12:4–7.

12. 'When we read of serfs here, we must note that it was a much heavier servitude than what we have amongst ourselves nowadays. True, we do hear enough about it, for it is practiced not only amongst Turks and barbaric countries, but even in Spain, where such traffics are taking place: wretched captives are being brought there, and held as slaves.' It is therefore in Spain that these captives are being held, and not, in Calvin's assumption, with the purpose of transferring them to America.

13. CO 39, 87: '*Hispani norunt quid sit servitus quia scilicet vicini sunt Afris et Turcis: deinde quos accipiunt in bello vendunt, et sicuti malum ex malo nascitur, ita etiam habent sibi miseros homines mancipatos in total vitam*' [Spaniards know what the condition of slave is, since they obviously are neighbours with Africans and Turks: those whom they take captive during wars, they sell afterwards, and as one evil generates another one, they even keep for themselves wretched people in perpetual bondage]. Spaniards therefore sell or resell slaves taken as booty during battles in the Mediterranean sea or along its coasts. Calvin does not even seem to have in view a kind of organised trade, like the one mentioned above in Andalusia, but merely war captives.

themselves did not engage in the practice of slavery: they only ever took members of enemy tribes in order to eat them ...¹⁴ Besides, as we have emphasised above, France, where Calvin grew up and with whose social practices he was very familiar in his capacity as a qualified jurist, did not launch itself into the triangular slave trade until after 1620, more than 50 years after Calvin's death. The only direct contact which Calvin had with slavery was the system of serfdom – by that time almost at an end – existent in the northern regions of France from which he came.

The principal parameters of Calvin's treatment of the slavery question

To achieve an understanding of Calvin's position on this subject, the best place to begin is probably with Sermon XCV on Deuteronomy (15:11–15) preached on Wednesday 30th October 1555 (see CO 27, 336–349). The following excerpts of this sermon summarise to a large degree the position articulated in Calvin's other texts, with which I will deal only to the extent that they contain elements adding to our understanding:

Afterwards, Moses adduced a law which was applicable to the polity of the Jews, yet whose substance nevertheless remains with us to this day. And so (he says) if your Hebrew brother or sister is sold to you, they shall serve you for six years and at the end of that term you shall release them. Now let us note that during that era they did not have servants as we have them today, who offer their services for one year in return for certain wages: instead, this was the sort of servitude which one sees today on the Barbary Coast, and in other countries where serfs are referred to as slaves. In those days all servitude was perpetual: such that a man was left to stagnate for hundred lives, without the least prospect of being released unless his master took pity on him. Furthermore, when a man owned serfs in this manner, he could arrange their marriage: since the serf was not free, his children were also born into servitude, just like animals (...) Now, this servitude was quite a harsh condition, as it was practiced everywhere: for it was regarded as legitimate even by Christians. It is not commanded that slavery be abolished. We see that Saint Paul, when speaking to the masters of such servants, who were loyal, does not command that they should be fully released: but that they should be treated with all humanity. Know (he says) that you have a common master in heaven and that they are children of God like you: therefore treat them gently, not subjecting them to servitude after the manner of unbelievers. Saint Paul, or rather the Holy Spirit speaking through him, is content to leave the matter at that. But because the Jewish people were privileged, and because God had chosen them for his inheritance, it was required of them that they should exercise a degree of moderation, refraining from the extreme harshness

14. Cf. De Léry (1994), in particular chapter 15 (pp. 354–377): 'How the Americans treat their war prisoners, and the ceremonies which they observe to kill and eat them.' Regarding the missionary ideal animating this expedition, Reverdin (1957:51) writes: 'To which extent the Genevans intended to evangelize their hosts?' We have seen that the ideal of converting the natives had been one of the main purposes of their undertaking. If we believe Léry, Villegagnon himself had suggested it. However, Villegagnon showed only contempt for his Topinambous allies. He merely considered them as 'beasts with human faces' and treated them harshly. But in the first of his letters, dated July 1556, Nicolas Barré was already thinking of their conversion, without hiding the fact that it would not be easy. 'I believe,' he wrote, 'that if God has mercy on them, they will be difficult to bring to Christianity; with great difficulty will one take away from them this wretch custom of eating one another' (author's own translation).

applied by the Pagans. Now it is a good thing that in the course of time this kind of servitude was abolished amongst believers, and whilst traces of it still remain, even this is far more tolerable than with so harsh a law as in days gone by. For if there are today people whom one calls subject to tallage, whether in terms of their goods or in terms of their persons, this is derived from the ancient form of servitude; they are descended from those who were fully enslaved and exposed to all the harshness of the law. Now, as I have already stated, it is quite tolerable and even to be judged worthy of praise that those who once were subjected to such forms of servitude have been relieved from them in favour of a moderate approach (...) There is no more servitude as existed back then amongst the Jews and all the Pagans: in some lands, such as the countries of the Orient, Greece and the Barbary Coast this type of servitude still exists: however, it is for the best that its usage be altogether abolished, as it has been amongst us; and this is most praiseworthy (...) (CO 27, 336–349)

This passage discloses the following four points:

- For Calvin, slavery is above all an ancient practice fallen into disuse, save for a few exceptions linked to the Orient (of which Greece, under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire, was a part) and the Mediterranean world (Barbary, that is, the principalities of the North African coast which were semi-autonomous provinces of the Ottoman Empire). The abovementioned issues related to the slave trade towards America do not seem to have been known to him.¹⁵
- In Europe, serfdom had equally fallen into disuse, with the exception of certain practices linked to the provision of goods or persons ('tallage'). Relationships between masters and workers (agricultural in the majority of cases) were contractual, based on annual hire.¹⁶
- This evolution of social mores had brought great relief and was worthy of praise when viewed next to the intolerable conditions imposed on the slaves of former times, who were subjected to the strictest and most unjust of treatment.

15. It is worth noting that John Mair, who taught at the College Montaigu during the first years of the 16th century (although we cannot be sure that Calvin would have been a student of his – cf. Cottret 1995:33) seems to have been the first, in 1510, to apply Aristotle's argument of natural slavery to the Amerindians: according to him, they were justly subjected to their European conquerors (cf. Pagden 1982:38–39). In his commentary on 1 Timothy, 1:9–10 (published in 1548 [cf Calvin 1855, vol. IV:191]), Calvin relegates to a bygone past the *andrapodistai*, that is, the slave traffickers against whom biblical Law is addressed – according to the text – along with other categories of sinners such as parricides, matricides, murderers, debauchees et cetera: 'As for the word which we translate by "thief of men", the crime of such people is called in Latin *Plagium*: formerly it consisted in stealing, or removing and bribing someone else's slave; or selling a man as a slave whereas he was of free condition, which is to engage in deceptive trade, since the laws forbid to sell someone who is of free condition. If you want to know more, look in the Civil Law.' It is most likely here that Calvin leans on laws enforced in France in his own time. The Latin text adds: '*ad legem Flavianam*,' referring the reader to Flavian law. In his sermon on the same text (fifth sermon, CO 53, 51–66, probably preached in October 1554 according to the Raguénier–Colladon catalogue), one does not find any mention of these slave traffickers: the emphasis is on the most common vices found in Geneva, since Calvin's listeners are Genevans in their majority. The Paulinian passage (1 Tim 1:9–10) is a New Testament echo of Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 15:13. Calvin comments at length on them in his commentary dated 1563, as we shall see below.

16. Calvin's perspective on serfdom reflects the social situation prevailing in Northern France during the 16th century. Cf. Delacampagne (2002:102): 'From the 12th century, the number and the harshness of corvées diminished, while serfdom affected only the most destitute peasants. During the 14th century and the 15th century social upheavals and high death rate contributed to reducing the number of serfs in the West to almost nothing'. Cf. also pages 108–109 with regard to slavery per se, which must be distinguished from serfdom: 'In France, domestic slaves (being frequently emancipated by way of testament) progressively disappeared from 1300 on, being replaced by a class of servants or employees receiving low wages. However, this transition occurred faster in the North than in the South. There were slaves in Montpellier well into the 16th century and, in the Roussillon province, the last notarized deed concerning the emancipation of a slave dates from 1612. Marseille's situation remains exceptional: due to the presence of royal galleys in its harbor, this city was the place of selling and buying slaves until the mid 17th century'.

- If the position of the slave has not been abolished in either the Old Testament or the New, it has been submitted – first of all amongst the Hebrews then amongst New Testament believers – to behavioural rules and imperatives which require them to exercise as much humanity as possible.

To these four points one can add a fifth, derived from the commentary of Genesis 12:4, where the condition of servitude is mentioned with Abram and his slaves coming out of the land of Haran: Calvin says, without necessarily adopting this explanation, that the origin of slavery is commonly ascribed to war and to the 'right' of the conqueror.¹⁷ However, it represents a corruption of the natural order through a kind of violence. This being said, slavery may not be illicit, by way of exception. As we shall see with Job's case, Calvin seems concerned to preserve the moral integrity of the patriarchs such as Abraham or Job: they had inherited the common use¹⁸ and possessed slaves in a licit way, but they treated them in a humane way which reflected divine precepts.¹⁹ Here we are back to the fourth point mentioned in connection with sermon XCV on Deuteronomy 15. Does this concession apply to Calvin's own time? This question is of course central to assessing his position on slavery. In the *praelectiones* on Jeremiah 34 there emerges a kind of dialectic on this issue which endeavours to maintain firmly two poles: on the one hand, it is clear to the commentator of the sacred texts that despite the violent initial corruption which introduced perpetual servitude in social relations, no commandment or precept – whether in the Old or the New Testament – forbids its practice. All that can be said is that it must be moderated in such a way that in its exercise, one should find fraternal relationships between masters and servants or slaves. On the other hand, Calvin declares further that it is unthinkable to revert to the kind of servitude practised, whether in the past or during his own time amidst barbaric nations.²⁰ As for the superstition which, in the same commentary on Jeremiah 34, might have been at the root of slavery's abolition amongst Christians,²¹ one may assume that it is linked to the

17.CO 23, 179: '*Unde autem habuerint initium servitus non facile dictum est: nisi quod vulgo obtinuit opinio, a bellis ortam esse: quia victores quos bellos ceperant, sibi parere coegerint, atque inde nomen mancipii deducunt.*' [Whence slavery originated is not easy to determine, unless according to the opinion which has commonly prevailed, it arose from wars; because the conquerors compelled those whom they took in battle to serve them; wherefore they derived the name of bondsman] It is precisely the case of captives taken by Spaniards during naval fights which Calvin mentions in his sermon on the same biblical text.

18.CO 39, 87: '*Abraham et alios patres servus usus fuisse pro communi et recepto more: et tamen non fuisse in illis hoc vitiosum.*' [Abraham and the other patriarchs possessed slaves according to the common and accepted custom of the time: however there was in them no vice]

19.In his sermon 54 on Genesis 12; Calvin (2000:602) adds: 'This is how it became licit for Abram to acquire serfs, as the common law of the time had it. But it is quite certain that he made use of his right as God taught him, that is, he did not display harshness or cruelty towards those who were subjected to him. In fact we shall see how they were ready and willing to obey him in everything and at all times: they did not abandon him even though he was a poor wanderer, for those who belonged to him could have found many a way out, if they had wanted ...'

20.CO 39, 87: '*Set tamen minime optandum est ut sint mancipia inter nos, sicuti olim fuerunt inter omnes gentes, et sunt etiam hodie apud barbaros* [It is however not in the least to be wished that there would be slaves among us, as there once used to be amid all the nations and there still exists nowadays among the barbarians]. Max Engammare correctly notes that in this passage 'Calvin continually moves between the serf and the servant, and vice versa' (Calvin 2000:601). If the words *servus* and *ancilla* can indeed be understood, under his pen, as meaning either *slave* or *servant* (male or female), the *mancipia* are juridically slaves. As such they bear this denomination, as the commentary on Gen 12:4 quoted above clearly shows: '*atque inde nomen mancipii deducunt.*' [Wherefore they derived the name of bondsman]

21.CO 39, 87: '*... potuit initio aliqua superstitio fuisse, et certe ita coniciio, principium mutandi illius moris fuisse natum a superstitione.*' [It might have been some kind of superstition at first, and I certainly conjecture that in the beginning changing this usage was born out of superstition]

administration of sacraments to subjects placed in a condition of perpetual servitude. The said administration would be deemed incompatible with this condition: Calvin would be rejecting this motivation for abolishing slavery as a mere display of sacramentalism, in fact of mere superstition.²²

Nevertheless, for Calvin the progressive dying out of slavery in Europe is a human and social progress which cannot be reversed. In his forty-sixth sermon on the first letter of Paul to Timothy (6:1–2), he clearly declares to his audience that it is unthinkable to return to a cruel system which has so happily fallen into disuse:

(...) but they were slaves, of the kind that are still used in some countries, in that after a man was bought the latter would spend his entire life in subjection, to the extent that he might be treated most roughly and harshly: something which cannot be done amidst the humanity which we keep amongst ourselves. Now it is true that we must praise God for having banished such a very cruel brand of servitude. (Sermon XLVI on 1 Timothy 6:1–2, CO 53, 546)

Let us now compare this extract to one taken from the forty-fourth sermon on the letter to the Ephesians (6:5–9),²³ which underlines Calvin's aversion to the practice of slavery ('a horrible and near brutal thing'):²⁴

Now when Saint Paul speaks of masters and servants, he does not speak of such servants as we have today, for in those times there were no servants who served a year or two for wages: they were kept in bondage for life and were in the same position as those whom we now refer to as bond-slaves. But let us not spend too much time in informing ourselves of these conditions.

22.I am grateful to O. Millet for having put me on this track, starting from the Medieval gloss on this issue (Decrees of Gratien, Lyon edition, 1620, *secunda pars*). The abovementioned declaration of Pius II (1462) intended for the governors of the Canary Islands is an echo of it. The general principle (which appears under *Causa XXIX, Quaestio II*) is: '*In libertatem vendicentur servi, qui ab infidelitate ad fidem accedunt.*' [Those slaves who from unbelief are brought to faith must be given back their freedom.]

23.CO 51, 797–802, preached in 1558 according to the Raguener-Colladon catalogue (Parker 1992:154).

24.One finds this aversion in nearly all the texts where Calvin speaks about the condition of slaves. To him it is the worst possible condition, particularly amongst pagan nations. Rhetorically he employs the style of vehemence to speak about it. Without trying to quote these texts exhaustively, let us mention three examples. Firstly, his sermon on Deuteronomy 23:12–17 (Monday 27 January 1556; CO 28, 106): 'Besides let us note that even laws had to give serfs some relief, due to the excessive cruelty of their masters. For the masters were abusing with great tyranny of whatever prerogatives they had on their serfs; if a glass had been broken and the master was somewhat angry, he could seize his serf and beat him up cruelly.'

This example seems to be a reminiscence of an anecdote mentioned in his commentary on the De Clementia which concerns a young slave of the cruel Vedius Pollio: he was guilty of having broken inadvertently a crystal goblet in the presence of emperor August. Without the latter's intervention, he would have been thrown into the pond filled with morays which Pollio thus fed. In the third sermon on Deuteronomy 17:14–18 (Wednesday 19 November 1555; CO 27, 459) the advent of monarchy in Israel will reduce the people to slavery in the following terms: 'And then he adds: "Fine, let them have a king." But it will be to torment them, to loot their houses, to steal their children and their daughters, to eat them up, to burden them with all kind of taxes: in short, they will become like miserable slaves. This is what they gained by asking a king.' In the second sermon on Deuteronomy 14:21–23 (Wednesday 23 October 1555; CO 27, 290) the condition of slave is analogically applied to that of birds which sacrifice themselves entirely for their brood, and are nonetheless ill-treated by humans (the Mosaic prescription is actually found in Deut. 22:6): 'For it is sheer cruelty when a man will find a nest of partridges or any other bird and will take the father or the mother from the little ones. God condemns this act, that is, he condemned it of old in the Law and the ceremonies. For what reason? Because it is against nature. We see how these poor birds take so much care of their little ones, to the extent that a mother will rather rot there than abandon them. By this example we are admonished to do the same. Therefore, when these poor birds deny themselves to carry the duties of their nature, enduring all kinds of hardships whilst having no other concern but to take care of their small ones, they will suffer to be caught by hand, and will be like slaves; and still someone should go so far as to hurt them? Is this not an act of cruelty? It is therefore for a good reason that God forbade it, to show that people must not trespass boundaries and do just whatever pleases them. On the contrary they must be kept within the norms of some humaneness.'

Indeed, we have good reason to praise God for having banished such bondage from amongst men. For there is no doubt that the rights which masters then had over their serfs were excessive, to the extent that they treated them like brute beasts, being entitled to put them to death for the least infringement. In fact, they had prisons in their houses where they would lock them in stocks, torture them and tear them to pieces; it was a horrible and near brutal thing. Now it was our Lord's will that, because of the wickedness of men, this state of affairs should be allowed to continue. (CO 51, 797–802)

Whatever aversion might have been expressed by Calvin (a little later on he compares the ancient slave masters to the pirates of his own time, yet another reference to the traffic of slaves on the Barbary Coast), the new element which emerges in this sermon is that of a divine Providence manifesting itself in judgment on fallen humanity. However, in order to emphasise that it is in no way representative of the ordinary and natural way of things, Calvin affirms in the same sermon that the *imago Dei* present in every human being does not allow any justification at all for slavery,²⁵ thereby breaking radically with the Aristotelian conception revived by Sepulveda during the same era. For each human being is a reasonable creature:

And this derived from sin, as one evil triggers another, until things descend into utter confusion. But if we examine the rights which masters had, we shall conclude every time that this is something which is contrary to the whole order of nature. For we are all fashioned after the image of God, and it was thus altogether too exorbitant that a reasonable creature upon whom God has stamped his mark should be put to such insulting condition. But such are the fruits of the disobedience and sin of our first father Adam: it has resulted in all things being turned upside down.²⁶

This position is clearly inspired by Saint Augustine, in *The city of God* (1960, vol. XIX, ss. xv–xvi), but goes much further in its denunciation of the evil inherent in the servile condition.²⁷ Calvin's commentary on I Corinthians 7:21 deals as follows with the passive acceptance of this humanly deplorable state to which an individual can find himself reduced:

Art thou called being a servant? We see here that Paul's objective is to appease their consciences; for he exhorts servants to be

.....
25.Cf. the sermon CXIII on Job 31, quoted below.

26.Cf. again the sermon on Genesis 12:4–7: 'Now it seems that this condition is contrary to God's order. There is no doubt that this happened as some confusion brought about by sin. For when God created men at his image and likeness, it is certain that he ennobled them so that their condition was not to be that of mere horses or oxen. They were not to be tormented at the good pleasure of their masters, no one was supposed to have the power to beat or kill them. There is therefore a corruption of the order which God had established upon mankind. And still, this servitude was nevertheless approved by God, in order to humiliate the pride of men' (see Calvin 2000:601).

27.Saint Augustine (1960, vol. XIX, ss. xv–xvi, 121–127): 'This is what the natural order prescribes, this is man such as God created him. For he said: "Let him rule over the fishes of the sea, the birds of the air and the reptiles crawling on the ground." So he wanted the reasonable being made at his own image to rule only over unreasonable creatures, not man over man, but man over animal (...) It is quite right indeed that one should regard the servile condition as being imposed to sinners. Actually we never find the word slave in scripture before the righteous Noah used it to reprove the fault committed by his son. Therefore the fault deserves this name, not nature (...) Thus the first cause of slavery is sin, causing man to become subjected to man by the bond of his condition; this does not happen without a judgment of God, in whom no injustice is found and who knows how to distribute the various burdens according to the merits of sinners (...) However by the very nature which God originally endowed man with, nobody is the slave of neither another man, nor of sin. True, even this servitude, as a ransom of sin, finds its place in the order of things, through the law that commands to keep the natural order and forbids to disturb it. For if nothing had been attempted against this [the original] law, there would have been nothing to chastise by the punishment of slavery.'

of good cheer and not to be cast down, as if servitude were an obstacle in the way of their serving God. *Care not for it then*, that is to say, be not concerned as to how you might throw off the yoke, as if it were a condition unbecoming to a Christian, but be contented in mind. And hence we infer, not merely that it is due to the providence of God that there are different ranks and stations in the world, but also that his word enjoins us to have regard to them (...) For he teaches that, as the liberty of the spirit is greatly preferable to the liberty of the flesh, servants ought to feel the unpleasantness of their condition more tolerable when they take into view that inestimable gift with which they have been endowed; and, on the other hand, that those who are free ought not to be puffed up, inasmuch as their condition in the principal respect is no superior to that of servants. We must not, however, infer from this that those who are free are made inferior to servants, or that political order is subverted. The holy apostle saw what was appropriate to both. Those that were free needed (as I have said) to be restrained, that they might not wantonly lord themselves over servants. On the other hand, servants were needful of consolation, that they might not be disheartened. Thus, when he argues that the inconvenience of the flesh is rewarded by a spiritual benefit, such things tend rather to the reinforcement of the political order. (Calvin 1856, vol. III, 374–375, The preface of this commentary is dated 24 January 1556)

A new parameter appears in the above two passages, namely a strong tension between two poles: on the one hand, an unjust condition, which is both intolerable and contrary to the good and perfect order of the original creation; on the other hand, the acceptance of that condition and of the political order that engendered it, all of which falls under the scope of divine providence. However, the latter, by reason of its own dynamic, provides remedies which are both necessary and sufficient to alleviate this condition without resorting to vague revolutionary ideas.²⁸ What are these remedies, and is there anything for slaves other than spiritual consolation, for example the beginning of social reform? Before addressing this question, we must first examine another source upon which Calvin drew in developing his approach to the subject of slavery: the classical source.

The classical source

Before having commented on the biblical text, Calvin had commented on Seneca's *De Clementia*. One passage of *De Clementia* (vol. I, s. xviii) applies the notion of clemency towards slaves in the following terms:

To rule over slaves with moderation is a commendable thing; and it is needful to ponder not the extent to which you can make them suffer with impunity, but what is permitted of you by the law of good and equity, which commands you to spare captives and men purchased with money. Is it not the case that the said law is even more just when it commands that a slave must not be abused but treated like a free and honest man, a citizen over whom you have authority by reason of your rank, and of whom you are the tutor rather than the master? Slaves find refuge near

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28.Calvin's commentary on verse 15 of Paul's letter to Philemon is quite explicit in this respect: 'For the joyous outcome of an evil is like a remedy given to us by the hand of God, to make us forget the fault of those who had offended us. Thus did Joseph, when he considered that what had happened was a special providence of God: being sold as a slave, he was lifted up from this condition and was able to feed his brothers and his father, having decided to forget about the treachery and cruelty of his brothers. He says that he was sent ahead for their own sake. Saint Paul therefore admonishes Philemon not to be so greatly offended by the flight of his serf, since it became the source of a very special blessing' (Calvin 1856, vol. IV, 354).

the statue of the prince: although one might resist them there are some things which a man is prohibited from doing by the common law of beings; for every man is of the same nature as you. (Seneca 1997:256–257)

One regularly rediscovers, in those of Calvin's passages on the theme of slavery written at least fifteen years after the appearance of his commentary on De Clementia, certain ideas, even certain terms borrowed, sometimes from Seneca, and sometimes from this commentary, which proves that this was, at least in part, the seed-bed of his thought on this subject. In the text of 1532, he begins his explanation of the passage 'from the major to the minor' ('*a maiori ad minus*') by writing: 'For the master must govern the slave in such a way that, at the same time, he acknowledges him to be a man.'²⁹ This acknowledgement of the similarity in the human condition – which, under the pen of the young Calvin, does not yet necessarily equate with the attribution of the *imago Dei* to all men, an attribution which will come later when he will consider the biblical text – is coupled with an appeal for just treatment, founded on the writings of two other classical authors, Cicero and Plato (Laws VI, 776b–777):³⁰

Even the lowliest human being must be treated justly. Such is the case with slaves. Those who insist that they be treated in the same manner as salaried workers, obliging them to complete their tasks but paying them in accordance with what they have earned, offer a wise prescription. Similarly, Plato in chapter 6 of The Republic, declares: this is the right way to educate slaves: do not shower them with insults, so that, if possible, they might be far less subjected to injustice than equals would be. (Calvin 1532:110)³¹

On reading the above Calvinian texts, we see that the social changes which, according to him, have been accomplished in Western Europe, correspond to the ideal of those authors whom he quotes and with whom he finds himself in agreement here: the slaves of yesteryear have been replaced by workers duly remunerated in accordance with the terms of a contract. But we will also see in later texts that he would not be satisfied anymore with the reasons invoked by the philosophers in the above texts. For the time being, the young

29. '*A maiori ad minus. Si nō omnia licēt domino in serū, ergo nec principi in subditū. Sic enim debet dominus seruo imperare, ut interim agnoscat omniē.*' Latin excerpts are quoted from the copy of the Bibliothèque de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français (Calvin 1532:110–113). In quoting them, I have stayed as close as possible to the original typography and disposition of the text. A saying taken from letter 47 of book V of Seneca's letter to Lucilius (cf. Veyne 1993:704–705) is often quoted by Calvin to illustrate the situation in Greco-Roman Antiquity when he deals with the topic of slavery in his sermons (e.g. on Eph. 6:5–9; CO 51, 797): 'People go on repeating this adage, inspired by the same scornful pride: As many slaves, as many enemies. There are not enemies. We are the ones who make of them enemies.' In the same letter (Veyne 1993:707), Seneca draws a parallel between social slavery and moral slavery: "He is a slave". But perhaps he is a free soul. "He is a slave". Shall we count this against him? Show me someone who is not. One is enslaved to debauchery, another to avarice, still another to ambition, all are slaves of hope, of fear (...) Therefore show yourself to your slaves, despite the disdainful, with a smiling face, a superiority devoid of pride; inspire them with reverence rather than fear.'

30. Quoted from memory by Calvin, according to Battles and Hugo (1969:269): 'This Ciceronian passage may have been cited from memory. Cicero's exact words are: "*Meminerimus autem etiam adversus infimos iustitiam esse servandam. Est autem infima condicio et fortuna servorum, quibus non male praecipunt qui ita iubent uti, ut mercenariis; operam exigendam, iusta praebenda.*" [We shall keep in mind that justice must be observed even towards the lowliest. The condition and fate of slaves is but the lowliest, and they do not give a bad advice those who prescribe to use them as paid workers: demanding that the work be done, paying them fair wages]

31. '*Est etiā erga infimū hominū genus servāda iustitia, inquit Cicero. Hi sunt servi, quibus vtbene quidā praecipivnt mercenariis, ad exigendas operas, & iusta praestanda. Plato quoq3 in 6. de rep. Est, inquit, recta servorū educatio, ut nulla illis cōntumelia inferatur: iniuriaq3 ijs multo minus, si fieri possit, q aequalibus inferēda.*'

humanist approaches 'the law of good and equity' spoken of by Seneca via Guillaume Budé's Annotations.³² He then takes up the notions of equity (*ἐπιείκεια*) and justice according to right (*το κατά τὸν νόμον δίκαιον*) differentiated by Budé in his Annotations on the basis of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics:³³

In fact given that the law demands complete rectitude without compromise, equity renounces the law to some extent (...) The meaning is thus: masters must not contemplate the extent of the power which the law gives them over their slaves, but must temper their authority in accordance with the norm of equity. (Calvin 1532:111)³⁴

Calvin demonstrates an evident knowledge of the sources of Roman law with regard to the servile condition, citing, amongst other things, the Institutes of Justinian (1.8.2) and the Justinian Code (1.25.1).³⁵ Where his commentary goes beyond a simple erudite quotation from the sources, in order to offer the reader a very personal interpretation, is when he halts briefly on the following phrase from Seneca: 'there are some things which a man is prohibited from doing by the common law of beings; for every man is of the same nature as you.' He writes:

In fact, nature has given all living creatures a social understanding, each according to its kind, in order that man does not commit violence against man, nor dog against dog or horse against horse. I have modified the ancient reading of the text in order to better emphasise this meaning. (Calvin 1532:112)³⁶

In the commentary on De Clementia we are still very far from a vision of the world and of human relations which takes into account both the *imago Dei* and the fall, as expressed in later texts. The young humanist takes as his own the ideas about

32. Annotations in XXIV Pandectarum libros, published in 1508, which is a treatise on modernisation of ancient law under Justinian (the Pandectes, edict in 533) (see Millet 1992).

33. Aristotle (1992, vol. V, ch. x, ss. 8, 231: 'One can therefore see what is equitable and what is just, and to which kind of just the equitable is to be preferred. This shows with no less evidence what an equitable man is: it is he who by a free choice of his reason prefers to do acts – and practices them in his conduct – such as I have just indicated. He does not force his right to the point of an unfortunate severity, but on the contrary releases it, although he has the law on his side. This is an equitable man, and this particular of being is equity: it is a kind of justice which is not a different virtue than justice itself.'

34. Calvin (1532:111): '*Sensus is igitur, dominos nō respicere q̄tū suo jure in servos possint, sed quadā aequatis norma tēmpere imperiū.*'

35. Slavery was part of the *Ius Gentium*, the right of people, and was sustained by war, its conquests and its prisoners. About it E. Petit (1913:64–65) writes: 'It was an essential element in antique societies. One notes surprisingly that the greatest philosophers accepted the principle of it as being necessary and natural. Some more lucid minds do acknowledge that according to nature all men are equal and free, and this truth found its expression into several texts of Roman jurisconsults. However, though Christianity loudly proclaimed it, it did not really come out of the theoretical sphere. This institution had penetrated into customs too deeply to make its abrogation possible. Except for legal measures which, already during the first century of the empire, protected slaves against the excesses of their master's powers, except also for a significant reduction of causes for enslavement, and some greater facilities granted by Justinian for emancipation (...) slavery was as flourishing under this prince as it was during Rome's first centuries.'

For a modern study on the juridical position of slaves under the Romans, epoch by epoch, cf. Max Kaser (1980:84–89). Kaser tempers somewhat Calvin's uniformly negative view of servile condition, in particular with regard to domestic slaves: 'By contrast, as far as the slaves served in their master's household and had, as personal servants, to wait upon their master and his family, or were employed in trade and commerce, their social position might be much more favourable. According to the circumstances, it was higher or lower in various ways, but under a sensible and well-to-do master, their position could be equal, or even better than, the condition of free citizens belonging to the lower classes, provided the slave showed goodwill and proved to be efficient' (Kaser 1980:85).

36. Calvin (1532:112): '*Natura enim indidit animalibus societate in suo cuiq3 genere, vt homo hominē non violet, nec canis canē, nec equus equum &c. Qui sensus vt elicit posset, mutavi veterē lectionē.*'

nature inherited from Aristotle and the Stoics,³⁷ even if it means assuming an innate harmony between members of the same species, but not necessarily between different species. It is important, however, to emphasise that the idea of analogy in the treatment of members of the same species will receive a new meaning in the texts coming below, being grounded this time on a very different principle. Basically, it is this accommodation of the classical source to the biblical themes as Calvin interprets them, which constitutes to a large extent the originality of his treatment of the question of slavery. Also, the classical source seems to count much more for him than the medieval gloss (without including in it Augustine's influence, though, as we have seen above).

From one analogy to another: The introduction of analogical right or distributive justice

It is probably in his commentary on chapter 6 of the letter of Paul to the Ephesians that Calvin outlines most clearly the transition from a lessening of the servile condition such as that envisioned by the ancient philosophers (the principle of equity enunciated by Seneca) to a superior norm which rises above a certain idea of nature proposed by the same philosophers. At the same time, Calvin takes up the Aristotelian notion of distributive justice, or analogical right, in order to attribute it to Paul, albeit in modified form.³⁸

And ye masters, do to them ... As the laws granted masters great freedom, many deemed to be licit whatever had been sanctioned by the civil law. To such an extent did their cruelty sometimes proceed, that the Roman emperors were forced to restrain their tyranny.³⁹ But even had no imperial edicts been issued

37. Paul Veyne (1993, ss. cxl–cxli) brings the following light on the Stoic position – in particular that of Seneca – on slavery: 'By taking into its own account the virtue of humanity dear to the Greco-Roman collective consciousness, Stoicism confers on it the authority of philosophy; it makes of it a strict duty and does not make anymore an appeal to elegance or good feelings. However, the positive consequences [of such a position] are quite uncertain: for one can always come to an arrangement with philosophy. Besides it is not all to want to become a humane master. To reach that stage you have to see yourself from outside. Seneca did not realize that he behaved like a grand gentleman towards people of lower condition. Finally, Stoic justice and benevolence aim at individuals but ignore institutions and society; a slave will be well or ill-treated, according to his merit, for Stoic justice is not any weakness, and benevolence is not blind. On the other hand, the injustice of the institution of slavery is not even noticed: the Stoic doctrine does not take into consideration institutions (therefore slaves will be treated as friends), simply because they do not count (therefore slaves will remain slaves) (...). This is quite a disconcerting and disappointing attitude for us today, but the fact remains: the Ancients were no more horrified by slavery than they suffered from not being familiar with electric lamps of steam engines. Stoicism has no conviction; its sole content is an impoverished notion of the self and a too general idea of the world. It does not have the means to think out politics and to take political positions.'

38. Aristotle (1992, ch. 4, s. 1, 203): 'The just which concerns only the distribution of society's common resources, must always follow the proportion which we have indicated. If one should start sharing all the social resources, the distribution should always respect the proportions between the parts brought by each one. The unjust, which is the opposite of the just thus understood, would then be what is contrary to this proportion.'

With distributive justice (διανεμητική) we are dealing with a geometric proportion, and not an arithmetic one, as is the case with rectifying or correcting justice (διορθωτική). Contrary to the latter, distributive justice advocates distribution according to merit, taking into account the inequalities between individuals: to unequal persons are allotted unequal shares. Rights, obligations, duties and advantages are distributed in the respect of criteria which vary according to the current ideology in Antiquity. There can be little doubt that whilst in Montaigu Calvin would have studied the Nichomachean Ethics in a Latin translation handed down by its Medieval commentators (cf. Parker 2006:29). On account of this he would have become familiar with Thomas Aquinas' views on slavery, which to a large extent follow Aristotle's, though without being confused with them (cf. Zagal 2003).

39. Kaser (1980:85): 'Slaves were protected against gross abuses of the master's power by the imperial legislation which was influenced by the humanitarian ideas of Greek philosophy. From this source came the idea that slavery was contrary to nature because all men were by nature free (...). On the whole, however, slaves benefited from their masters' interest in maintaining the physical efficiency and the

for the protection of slaves,³⁷ God allows masters no more than is consistent with the rule of love. When philosophers want to temper with great equity the excessive severity of masters towards their slaves, they teach that masters ought to treat them no differently from hired workers, that is, people earning wages in exchange of their labour. But they only go for utility, that is, what is advantageous to the head of the family and fits domestic order. Here Paul takes a very different principle. For he lays down what is lawful according to the Divine appointment, and even the extent to which they, too, are debtors to their servants. First he says, '*Do the same things, or similar things*', which means 'perform your reciprocal duty'. For what he has said in Colossians (IV:4): that which is just *and* the same duty, *is what in this passage he also calls the same, or the same things*.⁴⁰ And what is the purpose of all this, other than to observe what is called analogical right, that is, a right adjusted and modelled according to the circumstances and condition of each person? True, the condition of masters and of servants is not equal. Nevertheless there is a certain mutual right between them. That is, just as servants are bound to their masters, masters are somewhat bound to their servants too, keeping in mind the right proportion. Men generally assess this analogy wrongly, because they do not measure it by the law of love, which is the only true standard. This is what Paul means by the term 'the same thing'. For we are all ready enough to demand what is due to ourselves; but when our own duty is to be performed, everyone tries to plead exemption. It is chiefly, however, amongst the powerful and those who have received more honour and dignity that injustice of this sort rules. (Calvin 1556:829)

Thus, for Calvin the analogical right is 'measured according to the rule of charity, which is the only true measure'. The necessary reciprocity of rights and duties between masters and servants (applicable to the social relationships of his times) is not only affirmed, but is subject to a transcendent imperative from which it derives its source ('the ordinance of God'), an imperative which by far surpasses the purely utilitarian considerations of the philosophers in their plea for a self-limitation of the rights of masters over their slaves. Thus, in his theory of slavery, Aristotle emphasised that both parties derive reciprocal benefit from this estate of the social order, but he did not apply the notion of distributive justice to it as such, considering that concept as applicable only to the domain of citizens, as he emphasises in Nichomachean Ethics.⁴¹ Calvin, on the contrary, in his commentary on the passage of Colossians (4:1) (Calvin 1855, vol. IV, 102) – which stands in parallel with Ephesians 6:5–9 with particular regard to the expression 'mutual equity' – takes up the idea of analogical right or distributive justice, insisting on the fact that this ought to be applied to all estates:

'Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and in accordance with mutual equity'. He mentions first, 'which is just' by which

(footnote 39 continues...)

commercial value of their slaves, if not from the master's personal benevolence. It was on account of this interest that slaves were often much better cared for than were free men in unfavourable economic conditions. Accordingly, even the gift of freedom to the slave did not always ensure an improved social and economic position for him, especially when the patronal protection came to an end with the second generation.'

40. Τα αὐτα, in the text.

41. Aristotle (1992, ch. V, s 4, 208): 'Besides I readily admit that in all common relationships which citizens have amongst them, this kind of justice – namely proportional reciprocity and not strictly equal justice – is the very bond of society. The State can subsist only through this reciprocity which makes that every one gives back what he has received.'

term he expresses that humanity and gentleness of which he had instructed them in the Epistle to the Ephesians, VI, 9. But because masters, as if on high, despise the condition of servants, so that they think that they are bound by no law with regard to them, Paul puts them in their proper place, because both are equally subject to the power and authority of God. Hence, that equality and similar duty which he mentions.

'And similar duty.' Literally the Greek has: 'And equality.'⁴² Some explain it otherwise, but I have no doubt that Paul here employed this word to mean analogical or distributive right: meaning a right adjusted and modelled according to the circumstances, condition and calling of each person. In the letter to the Ephesians he used this word 'the same, or similar' with this meaning, as I have explained it there. For masters do not have their servants bound to them in such a way as not to owe them something in return. There is indeed a mutual right determined by considering the office and calling of each person: this mutual right should be in force amongst all estates. (Calvin 1854–1855)

Calvin glosses here on the hierarchy put in the text between 'that which is just' (το δικαιο) and 'mutual equity' (την ισοτητα): 'that which is just' just refers to Christian charity exercised individually. It is, if you like, the Christian version of the equitable principle expressed by Seneca, the voluntary limitation by a master of the rights accorded to him by positive justice at any given moment and in any given era; not out of a purely humanitarian concern, but in order to implement that which is permitted by divine ordinance. 'Mutual equity' is codified by the law. And it is, moreover, necessary that it should be, in order to mitigate the deficiencies of a Christian charity which is ignored or ridiculed, and to bridle the uncontrolled power of abusive masters. It is not a question of abolishing social institutions in which certain degrees of proportionality ought to be respected, but of applying these degrees of proportionality under the banner of an equality of status before God, which substantially modifies the parameters of such institutions.⁴³ Moreover, these parameters were set in accordance with the rule of charity which, according to Calvin in his sermon on Job chapter 31,⁴⁴ Job himself applied to his servants and maidservants – without taking into account the law in force at that time – when, for example, he granted them the right to plead their cause before him if he had some grievance against them:

And this is worthy of being noted: for however much – according to human law – a master had the right of life and death over his slave, we see how Job made use of it: namely, he restrained himself and imposed a law on himself, inasmuch as he knew

42. Και την ισοτητα, in the text.

43. Calvin's anti-revolutionary stance on this question appears clearly in his commentary on 1 Timothy 6:1, even though the servile condition is, once again, presented as quite odious (Calvin 1856, vol. IV, s. 254): 'It appears that from the beginnings of the Gospel serfs became bold, as if a banner had been raised to disenfranchise and set them free. In fact Saint Paul does not cease to suppress this abusive desire. The servile condition was actually so harsh and difficult that one should not be surprised if it was so odious. It is quite common for us to grab whatever has the least appearance to make our flesh profit from it. So when serfs heard that we are all brothers, they concluded immediately that there was no reason why they should be the slaves of their brothers (...) St Paul stops with one word all these disputes when he expects from all those who are under this yoke to submit themselves willingly to it. He makes clear that they should not ask whether they are worthy of this condition or of a better one, since it is quite enough that are subjected to this condition.'

44. Sermon CXIII on Job chapter 31, CO 34, 647–660. Verses 13–15 are translated as follows by Calvin: '13. If I denied my servant or my maidservant a just judgment when they contended against me; 14 What shall I do when God will rise? Did not he who made him, also make me in the belly? Didn't he form both of us in the womb?'

that according to God those who have such power should not abuse it or become tyrants, trampling under their feet creatures endowed with reason. We therefore must take note of what was the condition and status of slaves in this time: this will help us to understand better Job's humanity and the rectitude he displayed: he did not allow himself to do what men would have allowed him to do: for he understood well that it was not allowed by God (...) The word he uses here means 'to quarrel, to debate, to contend and have a case'. By this Job signifies that although he could shut the mouth of his servants and maidservants, although he could beat them up when he felt like it – and nobody would have been angry against him – however he gave them an opportunity to plead their good cause. When he was angry, if there was any reasonable excuse, his servants and maidservants could argue their case openly and show their right, so much so that he did not oppress them by force. (CO 34, 654–655)

Even more than in other texts on the theme of the relation between masters and servants, Calvin here puts forward the universality of the *imago Dei*, thus the unity of nature amongst all humans. Not to recognise this, and not to treat one's neighbour accordingly, amounts to denying that one is oneself the bearer of this image. In consequence such a person makes himself equal to wild beasts:

He declares throughout how he could moderate his passions so as to be humane in order to bear with his inferiors. For – he says – He who made them, made me too, we were all made from the same material. One could understand it as follows: we have all been shaped in the same matrix, that is, we are all descended from Adam, we all pertain to the same nature. But we must understand it even further. Job considered two things when he humanely bore in patience with his servants and maidservants. The first is that we have a common Creator, that we are all descended from God; then that there is a similar nature, so that we must conclude that all men, however low their condition might be and however despised they might be according to the world, nevertheless do have a brotherhood with us. Therefore he who does not bother to acknowledge a man as his brother, must make himself an ox, or a lion, or a bear, or some other wild beast, and so renounce the image of God which is imprinted in us all.⁴⁵ (CO 34, 655)

We are therefore led to ponder, with Calvin, a relation between – on the one hand – an *imago Dei* reciprocally acknowledged by all humans, whatever their mutual relationship may be, and on the other hand – as a corollary – the application of an analogical right manifesting a uniform dependency towards the source of this image. This application, which aims at instituting an equality of condition before God 'according to the rule of charity', becomes, so to speak, a manifestation of the *imago Dei* in each one, without taking his or her social condition into account. Only in connection with the Creator can each one recognise in another person a full human being

45. It is striking to note here the transfer of 'bestiality', which, in a large number of Calvin's texts on the theme of slavery, passively characterises the persons who are ill-treated ('they were treated like beasts'). This bestiality is now transferred to those very people who, for having denied others the mark of God's image in them, are guilty of inhumane treatments and so become 'bestial' themselves. Conversely, in the same sermon (CO 34, 657), the fair treatment of servants according to the norms put forward by pagan philosophers is given as an example and an argument that would make the hearers of God's Word inexcusable: 'What did Pagans say about this? We must use servants as paid workers, that is, people whom we would hire in exchange of wages, who would not be our subjects. Those are their very words. If the unbelievers of long ago have looked at it humanely, saying that each one should impose on himself some law and boundaries, despite the fact that it was licit to him to do his servants whatever seemed good to him; I beg you, which excuse will be left to us who have been enlightened by the Word of God, if we do not even display such consideration?'

and treat him or her as such. It is, however, always possible to apply this recognition from an unprivileged social condition, or even to make a person placed on the upper step of the social ladder recognise the presence of the Creator and the divine ordinance. This idea, linked to the Calvinian notion of vocation, is expressed, amongst other texts, in his sermon on Paul's letter to Titus (2:6–14):

Saint Paul comes now to the serfs, who were not then like today (people will have hired servants): they were slaves, and their condition was almost like that of oxen, or other animals which the master could kill like his dog. And still, saint Paul says that they will be the ornament of religion, provided they behave in such a way that the evil ones will be forced to feel that the doctrine of God is there to reform men and to lead them to sanctity of life. (CO 54, 523)⁴⁶

Such a vocation, instigated by Providence, has replaced the antique notion of 'Fortuna', which was linked to the ups and downs of existence, and marked by a certain fatalism. In his commentary on Ephesians 6:5, Calvin underlines this providential aspect of any human vocation lived as a service to men as well as towards God:

He says: Let them obey to God, when they faithfully serve their masters: as if he was saying: Do not think that you have been reduced to slavery merely by the action of men. God put this burden on your shoulders, who committed your labour and industrious work to masters. Thus he who endeavours to render a good service to his master with a good conscience, does not only do his duty towards man, but also towards God. (Calvin 1856:828)

The relationship between – on the one hand – the *imago Dei* common to all and the exercise of analogical right which flows from it, and – on the other hand – between Providence and accepting one's condition – as humble as it may be – leads us now to ask the question: What is the regulating role of the State for Calvin?

The role of the State: Reforming by which means?

Earlier we noted in Calvin's writings the tension which surfaces between acknowledging the injustice inherent in the condition of slavery and accepting this condition within the framework of a dispensation of Providence; thus without any intention of reversing situations (a reversal operated by the very people who consider themselves victims of a given order). If the application of analogical right, and its foundation, are underlined in the two parallel commentaries quoted (Eph 6 & Col. 4), it remains to be asked who is responsible for this application: Is it purely the individual responsibility of the masters towards their servants (as in the case of Job) or is it a function of the State?

46. Further (CO 54, 527), Calvin applies this teaching to his contemporaries, therefore in a situation marked by different social relations: 'Though amongst us there is no such servitude as it existed formerly, this doctrine is not useless to us. Those who find themselves in an average subjection must fulfil their duty with all the more cheerfulness. For this is the comparison we must make: if those who were slaves and were treated with such cruelty, having no relief, were bound by God to obey their masters - the very people who exercised tyranny towards them - what will be with those who are hired workers and are not tormented thus, if they do not fulfil their duty? Will they not be twice guilty before God? They certainly will. For inasmuch as our condition is pleasant and bearable, we shall have less excuses, lest we decide to comply.' One should note here the notion of distributive justice applied this time to divine judgement: those placed in a much more favourable social condition will be judged in proportion to their double guilt.

In his sermon on Job 31, Calvin applied the abovementioned teaching to all those who exercise a public office, in particular kings and princes, called more than anyone else to impose upon themselves a rule of humility, of humanity and of service towards others:

If therefore a person must privately use such humanity towards those who are inferior to him, how much more those who have the authority over justice? For these do not dominate like masters over servants and maidservants. There is an authority, and a pre-eminence worthy of honour: but it is not to dominate in such a way that others should be in servitude: on the contrary let kings and princes not flatter themselves to the point of believing that the world was created for them; rather, they are created for the multitude. Did not God establish kingdoms and principalities for the common good? It was not to elevate merely two or three amongst others, not at all: it was in order to put some order and some polity amongst human beings. (CO 34, 656)

One would tend to think, reading this passage, that kings, princes and magistrates have the duty to reform human policies in an abolitionist sense, by establishing a kind of social justice taking into account all the parameters mentioned above. However, in his sermon on Ephesians 6:5–9 (already quoted above), Calvin shows himself much more conservative towards aspirations of emancipation, though he knows perfectly that such aspirations are hardly contained in the victims of this human exploitation. He expresses himself quite clearly on the relationship between Gospel and human policies:

Saint Paul therefore admonishes masters to moderate what was excessive in their superiority; nevertheless he wants serfs to submit to it, and to bear the yoke that was so harsh and heavy. Now in this it would seem that he would wrong the serfs and that he should have rather cried out against this common abuse, so that such violence should be suppressed. But we must remember two principles in order not to attempt any change. The first is that since God wanted to throw humankind into confusion, and that everybody – high ones and humble ones – should clearly know that Adam had perverted the order of nature, here Saint Paul advises that serfs should bear such subjection, knowing that it comes from God, and so accept it patiently. Then there is the second principle, namely that the Gospel is not there to change the policies of the world, and to make laws which pertain to the temporal order. It is true that kings, princes and magistrates must always ask from the mouth of God and conform to his word: nevertheless the Lord gave them the liberty to make such laws as they would deem appropriate and useful for the regime entrusted to them, but they must invoke God that he may give them a spirit of prudence and wisdom. Since they are not sufficiently equipped for this, let them take counsel from the word of God. However these are different things: the doctrine of salvation (called the kingdom of heaven) and that which serves to keep us in some kind of bridle, so that men should know how to conduct themselves amongst each other. This is why S. Paul left the condition of slave as it was. (CO 51, 798)

Several remarks on this passage are necessary, and should now allow us to approach the conclusion of our study (they are applicable to the topic of slavery as well as to many others):

- There is a divine judgement on mankind, which has existed in a state of Fall since Adam, and this judgement is the cause of situations not conforming to the good original order; it must therefore be accepted whilst

acknowledging that God exercises it through his sufficient Providence (this is the Augustinian motive noted earlier).

- The Gospel is not a political code which can and should be applied in a uniform manner to all situations; it is the task of public authorities to establish laws which are appropriate for specific situations, whilst always keeping in mind an ethical imperative of reciprocal conduct between individuals.
- There can therefore be no *theocracy* properly speaking, since the spiritual polity (the doctrine of the kingdom of heaven) and the earthly polity are different. In other words, Paul did not try to substitute himself to Caesar.
- Nevertheless, civil authorities (princes, magistrates) have a duty to pay careful attention to the Word of God in order to draw from it the wisdom which will allow them to promulgate the most appropriate laws, within the scope of their free prerogative.
- Since they do not possess this wisdom by themselves, they will have to consult this Word, which, by extension, means consulting the doctors or teachers of this Word. The advisory function of the church towards civil authorities, through the ministry of the Word, appears here in a muted way as an instrument of divine Providence for the government of societies.
- In dismissing any attempt to take directly one's fate into one's own hands by those who deem themselves the victims of a certain order,⁴⁷ Calvin clearly has in view the bitter experience of the Anabaptists and the peasant revolt in Germany during the 1520–1530s.⁴⁸
- His own correspondence with kings, princes, magistrates throughout Europe amply proves that he sees himself vested with a counselling mission towards civil authorities, even though he speaks above all about matters of ecclesiastical polity. The dedicatory epistles of his commentaries to the same kings, princes and magistrates show that he aims at educating them on the contents and implications of the texts of scripture.

A last example, taken from Calvin's commentary on the eighth commandment (CO 24, 700–702 cf. the end of note 18), will shed light on several aspects mentioned: in particular the admonition addressed to civil authorities to turn towards the Word of God can at times mean that they will be directly put into contact with quite specific prescriptions about the organisation of social life in the context of the Old Testament. The Latin version of this commentary was published in 1563 and is dedicated to Prince Henri, Duke of Vendôme, heir to the kingdom of Navarre, then only ten years old. The treatment of slaves within the Hebrew community (i.e. the sale of one's own person to a master until the jubilee year, for

47.CO 51, 798: 'Besides, serfs being thus subjected, it seems that if they could exempt themselves from it by whichever means, this had to be licit, and there would be a good excuse.'

48.CO 51, 802–803: 'Saint Paul says, amongst other things: "The master who are according to flesh." Amongst Satan's deceptions, by which he formerly attempted to disturb the order of the world and make the doctrine of the Gospel detestable, he has put this heresy in the head of many people: namely, if we are spiritual then we must not be subjected anymore to all kinds of political dispensations which are now obsolete, for such cannot be the status of God's children. And so in our time we have seen many rebels and fanatics who tried to abolish all principalities, suppress all taxes and duties, each one becoming his own master, like rats in straw, as the saying goes. Their argument was: since God adopted us as his children and since the world has now been renewed, in order to be grafted in the body of our Lord Jesus-Christ there is no reason whatsoever why unbelievers should rule over us; it is quite contrary to equity and even to the honour of God.'

economic or matrimonial reasons) is dealt with within the frame of the eighth commandment. Calvin notes that Exodus 21:6 offers more clarity on the form of such arrangement than Deuteronomy 15:16. For it is said that the master will bring the slave to the judges (*tunc adducet eum herus eius ad iudices*) before his ear is pierced against the doorpost as a sign of perpetual servitude. This appearing before the judges, Calvin explains, aimed at preventing a master from forcing his slave to remain at his service during the Sabbath year which allowed him to recover his freedom. The slave had to be granted the possibility of making a public declaration (not constrained) to the effect that he wanted to remain the slave of his master. It was therefore a barrier against possible abuse by unscrupulous masters: 'for if any private person had been the arbiter in his own cause, the houses of the rich would have become halls of torture in order to torment the poor slaves.'⁴⁹ Calvin's commentary shows his readers (first of all, the prince to whom it is dedicated) the role of an institution – both divine and civil – of protection of Hebrew slaves, which will serve as an instruction, or source of wisdom, to the princes of his time when they will have to promulgate just ordinances.

Looking at what Calvin wrote on slavery, in particular at his aversion, vehemently expressed, to a practice which he not only sees as obsolete but which he also deems unthinkable to reinstate (... *which cannot be done amidst the humanity which we keep amongst ourselves* ...), one can reasonably assume that he would have approached the civil authorities of his own time in the way indicated in his sermon on Ephesians 6 in order to counter the reappearance of this practice, had he directly taken cognisance of it.

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49. 'In Exodo autem additur circumstantia, ut interveniat publica cognitio: nam si privatim quisque eius rei fuisset arbiter, divitum aedes carnificinae fuissent ad miseris servos torquendos (...) cuius mali remedium fuit, libera apud iudices confessio.'

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