

Did John Calvin Author a Hymn?

By Andrew Myers

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Jean Garnier (d. 1574) was a pastor of the Reformed Church at Strasbourg, France 1544/1545-1549, 1552-1555 and 1569-1574. His pastoral career had its up and downs, including a period of conflict with local magistrates in the mid-1550's over his doctrine of the Lord's Supper. It is believed that to Garnier is due credit for overseeing the production of the 1545 and 1553 Strasbourg Psalters.

The significance of this is noteworthy for a particular reason. It is often claimed that John Calvin authored a hymn which appears in only those two Strasbourg Psalters (published when he was not the pastor of that church) and not in any of the Genevan Psalters, or any Psalter that he superintended. The hymn is "Salutation à Jésus-Christ," or "I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art." While this attribution is widespread, and has bearing on the important question of Calvin's views towards exclusive psalmody, it is doubted by notable scholars who have delved into Calvin's role in the production of the Strasbourg and Genevan Psalters. Rather, it has been proposed that Jean Garnier is the most likely author of this hymn.

Emmanuel Orentin Douen, *Clement Marot et le Psautier Huguenot*, Vol. 1, p. 452, on the hymn in question:

Ce morceau n'est point, on le voit, une traduction de la Bible, mais une composition libre qui ne rentre dans la maniere de Calvin, et dont Garnier est peut-etre l'auteur.

[Translation: "This item is not at all, one sees, a translation of the Bible, but a free composition which does not fit Calvin's manner, and of which Garnier is perhaps the author."]

Erik Routley and Peter Cutts (ed.), *An English-Speaking Hymnal Guide* (2005), p. 83:

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French: JE TE SALUE, MON CERTAIN REDEMPTEUR, which according to Douen appears in the Strasbourg Psalter (1545), and according to E. [Pierre] Pidoux is certainly in the edition of 1553 but not that of 1548. It has been attributed to John Calvin, but Pidoux judges this ascription very unlikely; also attr. to J. Garnier, which Pidoux says is mere "guesswork" (*Le Psautier Huguenot*, 1962). It must be regarded as anonymous.

Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 168 (footnote 3):

The hymn "I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art" is sometimes attributed to Calvin, but there is no real evidence for his authorship. For a discussion of the background and evidence, see Armin Haessler [Haeussler], *The Story of Our Hymns* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1952), pp. 306-309. Felix Bovet of Neuchatel in his *Histoire du psautier des Eglises Reformees* (1872) held Calvin's authorship to be rather doubtful. O. Douen in his *Clement Marot et le psautier Huguenot* (1878) ascribes it to Jean Garnier. Prof. Eduard Reuss of Strasbourg, though originally skeptical about Calvin's authorship, nonetheless includes it in his compilation of the *Lesser Works of Calvin in the Corpus Reformatorum*, Vol. 34, 1867. Philip Schaff, *Christ in Song*, p. 678, also attributes it to Calvin. The hymn first appeared in the 1545 edition of the French Psalter, Strasbourg, four years after Calvin left.

John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (1892), p. 579:

Je Te salue, mon certain Redempteur. Jehan Calvin (?) [*Praise to Christ.*] This hymn, entitled "Salutation a Jesus-Christ," first appeared in the edition of the *French Psalter*, published at Strassburg in 1545, the Strassburg copy of which unfortunately perished in the destruction of the Town Library during the bombardment of Strassburg in the Franco-German war. It has been ascribed to Calvin, but F. Bovet, in his *Histoire du Psautier des Eglises Reformees*, 1872, and Dr. E. Reuss, of Strassburg, who included it in 8 st. of 8 lines in the "Lesser Works of Calvin" (*Corpus Reformatorum*, 1867, vol. xxxiv.), both regard his authorship as very doubtful. O. Douen, in his *Clement Marot et le Psautier Huguenot*, 1878-79, thinks it probable that the author was *Jean Garnier*, then Minister of the French Congregation at Strassburg. Mr. Bannerman gives an interesting summary of the evidence as a preface to his translation [see below].

D. Douglas Bannerman translated this hymn and prefaced his translation with the following comments, "Calvin's Hymn to Christ," in W.G. Blaikie, ed., *The Catholic Presbyterian*, Vol. II. July-Dec. 1879 (Dec. 1879), p. 458-459:

It would be more correct to say of this hymn that it is ascribed to Calvin than that it was certainly written by him. The first edition of the French metrical Psalter was published at Strassburg in 1539. The discovery of a solitary surviving copy in the library at Munich was made a few years ago by M. Douen, in the way described by Professor Mitchell in his interesting article, in the March number of this journal, on "Calvin and the Psalmody of the Reformed Churches." This primitive Psalter contained eighteen psalms, and three sacred songs, published with the music. Four of these psalm versions are certainly by Calvin (25, 38, 46, 91); and it is probable that he is also the author of the versions of Psalm 36, the Song of Simeon, and the Decalogue.

Several editions followed, a full account of which is given by M. Bovet in his very valuable work, "Histoire du Psautier des Eglises Reformers," Paris, 1872, pp. 247-52.

The hymn entitled "Salutation a Jesus Christ," a translation of which I give below, occurs only in the Strassburg edition of 1545 (so lovingly described by Bovet, p. 252), which opened with Calvin's celebrated preface: "Jehan Caluin a tous Chrestiens et amateurs de la parole de Dieu," John Calvin to all Christians and lovers of the Word of God. Dr. Schaff ascribes this hymn to Calvin without sign of doubt—adding, "It reveals a poetic vein, and a devotional fervour and tenderness, which one could hardly have suspected in the severe logician." "Christ in Song," Lond. 1870, p. 549. It may be observed, however, in passing—as Dr. Schaff would no doubt readily admit—that those who regard Calvin simply or chiefly as "a severe logician," know very little of the man, and of the qualities revealed especially in his letters. Compare the references in Cunningham, "Reformers and Theology of the Reformation," pp. 11 f., 313 f.

The English translation contributed to Dr. Schaff's collection by Mrs. H. B. Smith of New York, is careful and accurate; but, from following closely the metre of the original, it has, perhaps, a certain stiffness, which I have tried to avoid in the subjoined translation, by choosing an English metre of a simpler kind. The Rev. W. Fleming Stevenson gives five verses of Mrs. Smith's translation in his admirable little volume, "Hymns for the Church and Home," Lond. 1873, p. 149. There is also a German translation by Dr. Stahelin. of Bale, the biographer of Calvin. Reuss puts the hymn, along with nine psalms, the Song of Simeon, and the Ten Commandments in French verse, among Calvin's "Lesser Works" ("Corpus Reform.," vol. xxxiv. Brunsv. 1867), and says in his "*Prolegomena*," p. xxii, after going over the facts regarding them, so far as known: "We place, therefore, those psalms at the end of the service-book, as a genuine work of Calvin, of less importance, indeed, from a theological or poetical standpoint, but still unique of its kind, and noteworthy, if but on this account, that it is now for the first time brought out from its concealment. To these should be added that older poetical version of the Decalogue, which we have found to be altogether different from that of Marot. Bovet has made us doubtful of the Calvinian origin of the Song of Simeon. Much less do we venture to commend to our readers the other sacred songs, which we have noted above as different

from those of Marot's collection, as being the works of Calvin; indeed, the learned author, to whom we have referred (Bovet), has propounded to us several considerations of much weight (*gravissimas*), by which he holds that it may be proved that these productions should be ascribed to some other than Calvin." But since this question appears worthy of fuller discussion, and one which should be submitted to the judgment of other learned men also, who have, it may be, chosen, or may hereafter choose, to cultivate for themselves this department in the history of French literature, we have thought that we should do a tiling not altogether useless by reserving a few pages for those songs, regarding which there is still some doubt.

Sherman Isbell, in an extended discussion of the authorship of this hymn, writes in his article, *The Singing of Psalms*:

The most likely supposition respecting the authorship of the "Salutation à Jésus Christ" is that it was produced by the man who bore primary responsibility for the only two psalters in which it was included [Jean Garnier].

My own studies lead me to believe it is likely, even probable, that Jean Garnier is the author of this hymn, although it is difficult to say so definitively. It is with greater certainty that one may say there is "no real evidence" to ascribe authorship of the hymn to John Calvin.

There appears to be strong evidence of another case of widespread mistaken attribution involving a work truly done by Jean Garnier. "A Brief and Clear Confession of the Christian Faith, containing an hundred articles, according to the order of the Creed of the Apostles, 1550" is included in the *Later Writings of Bishop Hooper*, and often ascribed to John Hooper elsewhere. However, the editor of that work allows that he has never seen the "1550" edition, but relies rather upon editions dated 1581 and 1584. In fact, as demonstrated by Don Ross, the claim of Hooper's authorship is untenable, and Francis Higman too has actually traced the history of this work to Jean Garnier. Hooper translated it, but he was not the first to translate it into English (editions of which were published in 1581 and 1584), only the third (other translations having been published in 1562 and 1579 previously). Yet, somehow, it was included in Hooper's *Works* and therefore he has long mistakenly been given credit for a work that was truly authored by Garnier.

Don Ross goes through the internal clues (such as a reference in the prologue to the Augsburg Interim, an event which occurred in just prior to, and led to, Garnier's departure from Strasbourg) and compares the translations, as well as events in the life of Hooper (such as another confession that Hooper actually did author in the year 1550), his potential contacts with Jean Garnier, the variants spellings of Garnier (Garner, Gardiner) and their relationship to the texts at hand, and events in the life of Garnier. He traces the translations back to the original, and shows conclusively that the Confession was authored, not by John Hooper, but by Jean Garnier. (Don S. Ross, "Hooper's Alleged Authorship of 'A Brief and Clear Confession of the Christian Faith,'" *Church History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Mar., 1970), pp. 18-29).

Francis Higman, "Theology for the Layman in the French Reformation 1520-1550," in Andrew Pettegree, ed., *The Reformation* (2004), p. 131:

Jean Garnier, *Briefue et claire confession de la foy Chrestienne, Contenant Cent articles, selon l'ordre du Symbole des Apostres, faicte & declairee l'an 1549.*

[Basle], Jacques Estauge, [c. 1551].

Later editions in 1552, 1555, 1558; translated three times into English, by Nicholas Malby (1562; STC 11621), John Brooke (1579; STC 11620.7), and Bishop John Hooper (1581; STC 1219).

References: on this text and its editions, see Philippe Denis, *Les Eglises d'etrangers en pays rhenans (1538-1564)* (Paris, Belles Lettres, 1984), pp. 537-41.

History does well to sort out such matters and give credit where credit is due, and Jean Garnier has been too often overlooked as the likely author of "Calvin's" hymn and the certain author of Hooper's "Brief and Clear Confession of the Christian Faith."

A biographical sketch of Garnier is found in "Appendix II. Jean Garnier of Strasburg," in Arthur Edmund Garnier, *The Chronicles of the Garniers of Hampshire during Four Centuries, 1530-1900* (1900), pp. 120-122.