

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Beza as Correspondent and Poet

PHILIP EDGCUMBE HUGHES

THANKS TO THE ENTERPRISE of publishing houses like Librairie Droz of Geneva, texts of the sixteenth century hitherto submerged under piles of archives or long since out of print are being edited and published, anew or for the first time, to the great advantage of students of the Reformation. Of the volumes produced more recently by Librairie Droz there are two to which I wish to call attention in this article as containing material of unusual interest, namely, Tome V of the *Correspondance de Théodore de Beze* (number 96 in the series entitled *Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance*) and *Abraham sacrificiant*, a drama in verse by Beza on the subject of the sacrifice of Isaac (*Textes littéraires français*, No. 135). The letters which comprise the former volume were collected by Hippolyte Aubert and edited by Henri Meylan, Alain Dufour, and Alexandre de Henseler, and the editors of the latter work are Keith Cameron, Kathleen M. Hall, and Francis Higman. The price is 44 and 14 Swiss francs respectively. Both volumes are excellently produced and expertly annotated.

Beza, whose Christian name Dieudonné was latinised to Deodatus and later grecised to Theodore, was born in 1519 at Vézelay in France of aristocratic stock. He was thus Calvin's junior by ten years, and he was destined to succeed Calvin, on his death in 1564, as the leader of the Reformed cause in Geneva. He and Calvin were first thrown together in 1528 when Beza was still a small boy and Calvin not yet out of his teens. Both had come to Orleans to receive instruction from the German scholar Melchior Wolmar, and in the following year both went with Wolmar to Bourges. Under his roof they probably made their first acquaintance with the doctrines of the Reformation. Wolmar himself had been influenced towards the Reformed position by the Frenchmen Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Guillaume Budé. Later on, in his thirties, Beza, gifted both intellectually and socially, readily found acceptance in the literary and humanist circles of Paris. His tastes were expressed in the writing of poetry and in conforming to the

life of his social class with all its distractions; but at the same time a spiritual struggle was going on in his breast. 1548 saw the publication of a volume of his poems (*Poemata Juvenilia*), some of which he felt it necessary to expurgate in later editions—'I confess', he wrote two years later in the preface to his *Abraham Sacrifiant*, 'that I have always had a natural pleasure in poetry, and this is something for which I do not apologise; but I do regret having employed such small talent as God has given me in this respect in matters the mere remembrance of which causes me now to blush'.

Later in that year (1548) a serious illness proved a time of spiritual decision for him and, leaving behind his wealth, his literary aspirations, and his family connections, he made his way to Calvin's Geneva. In November of the following year he was appointed Professor of Greek at the Academy of Lausanne, and it was at this juncture that he composed the drama *Abraham Sacrifiant*. In 1558 he moved back to Geneva to become professor at the new Academy there and continued in that city, first as Calvin's colleague and then as his successor, until his death at the age of 86 in 1605. Among the most celebrated of his publications was his edition, in 1565, of the Greek New Testament together with Jerome's Vulgate version and his own Latin translation. To the second edition, which came out in 1582, Beza added the Greek Codex Bezae (discovered by him in Lyons twenty years previously), the Peshitta version and a Latin translation of the Arabic version. His correspondence, much of which is now becoming available for the first time, is important for the light it throws on the events and personages of his day.

Beza the correspondent

AS already indicated, this article takes account only of the fifth and most recent of the volumes of Beza's correspondence now in process of publication (the majority of the letters from and to Beza are in Latin, but some are in French, as are also the valuable annotations and the preface). It will, further, be concerned with a particular aspect of this correspondence which is of exceptional interest, namely, the last illness and death of Calvin, covering as it does the twelve months of 1564, the year in which Calvin died. All other matters mentioned in these letters are overshadowed by this one event.

Beza and his confreres in Geneva were well enough accustomed to the physical infirmities with which Calvin had long been afflicted (for an excellent discussion of the nature of these infirmities see Jean Cadier, 'Les Maladies de Calvin', in *Monspeliensis Hippocrates*, December 1958), and there is no particular note of alarm or anxiety when, in writing to Bullinger in Zürich on January 10, he mentions in a quite incidental manner that 'our brother Calvin is perpetually battling with

his illnesses'. Again, on the 24th day of the same month he reports to Bullinger: 'Our brother Calvin is battling as usual against an army of ailments, but now again he seems to me to be slightly stronger'; and in a note of the same date to John Haller he says that Calvin's health is not different from what he is accustomed to endure, but that only to the slightest degree does it serve as an excuse for the relaxation of his labours. On February 13 Bullinger writes to Beza: 'I rejoice that Calvin is somewhat better. Congratulate and greet him for me. May the Lord long spare him safe and sound to us!' On March 6, however, we find the news taking a more serious turn: 'For the past month,' Beza informs Bullinger, 'the many grave ailments by which my most worthy father and master Calvin is sorely afflicted have daily grown in seriousness'. Indeed, February 6, exactly a month previously, was the last date on which Calvin ever preached from his pulpit in Saint Peter's, and just four days after this letter was written the citizens of Geneva were requested by the City Council to pray for the recovery of Calvin who was now seen to be in danger of death. Towards the end of the month, on March 28, Jerome Zanchius wrote from Chiavenna to Beza, 'You can well imagine with what grief I was affected by the news, which Bullinger wrote to me from your letter, that Calvin is mortally ill'.

By now Calvin was sinking rapidly and it was obvious that he would not rise again from his bed. 'We are all enduring terrible anguish', Beza writes to Bullinger on April 5, 'because our brother Calvin is tortured by unremitting afflictions and even seems at times not to be breathing; indeed, his condition is such that we entertain far less of cheerful hope for him than we would wish'. In another letter to Bullinger, dated April 15, Beza sadly gives the following report:

With regard to our brother Calvin's health, you will have received his recent letter, which I very much fear will be the last he ever writes. [The letter in question, dated April 6, was indeed the last that Calvin wrote.] For the torture of the stone becomes ever greater, joined as it is with his various other incapacitating pains, and so extreme is the exhaustion of his emaciated body that it no longer responds to any remedy. From this you can sufficiently understand, my father, with what sorrow we are all of us here overwhelmed, since it is obvious that we could receive no more crippling wound than that this little ship, deprived of so outstanding a pilot, should be compelled to drift as though in the midst of the storm. . . . Nor do we doubt that, because of the mutual love between us and your personal affection for him, you there [in Zürich] will also share our sorrow. May the Lord therefore be with us, and, if it is his will to call his servant to himself, yet may he not desert us, but rather revive and comfort us, until at last, our earthly course completed, we too are gathered to that eternal rest.

Bullinger replied (April 19) that Calvin's letter had been most welcome, but that reading it aroused an immense sorrow within him; 'for I see',

he said, 'that the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that he cannot continue to live under the burden of so many ailments'.

Three days later Beza writes again to Bullinger, as follows:

Our domestic calamity, I mean the grievous illness of our brother Calvin, torments us more and more, and I beseech you, my father, that together with all your colleagues you will continue to do what already you are doing, namely, that you will earnestly commend God's faithful servant to his Lord and this whole church to the faithful Guardian of our souls.

In another letter addressed to the same recipient (May 4) Beza says:

We are tormented far more [than by other pressing problems] by the constant sufferings of our very dear father and God's faithful servant, of whose life, humanly speaking, we now completely despair. He is still living, however, and indeed in such a way that he who formerly was an example to us of a blameless life now provides in himself a singular example of a brave and truly Christian death. Unhappy me, what am I to do, on whom so heavy a weight descends? I beseech you, my father, commend me to the Lord, together with all my colleagues, that now if ever he may take the helm and truly support us by his divine power. Grief makes it impossible to write further about this.

The heavy weight to which Beza refers is the responsibility of succeeding Calvin as leader of the church in Geneva, for which he was the obvious choice both by natural ability and by popular wish.

Bullinger's reply, dated May 12, speaks sadly of the irreparable loss that the death of this one man will be to the universal Church of Christ, especially at a time of such unrest. He assures Beza that, as he will undoubtedly be called on to succeed Calvin, God always instructs, strengthens, and preserves with his gifts those whom he calls. 'If Calvin is still living,' he adds, 'pray, as from me, that the Lord will grant him every blessing.' He goes on to speak of his own readiness to depart this life and enjoy rest from his labours, as he is now almost sixty years of age and in the forty-second year of his ministry. (He would, in fact, live on for another eleven years.) The following day we find Beza addressing Bullinger again:

Our constant anguish continues while our most dear father and master Calvin struggles on in such a way that I cannot possibly describe to you either his agonies or his constancy. Surely the Lord wishes to display in this one man an outstanding example of a death as well as a life that is truly brave to this ungrateful and perverse age. May the Lord comfort us and enable us to refer everything to his glory.

On May 24 he acknowledges gratefully Bullinger's letter of the 12th and prays that God will provide the needed strength as he faces the responsibility which will soon be his. On Calvin he reports:

The day before yesterday I greeted our brother Calvin, now hastening ever more rapidly to his eternal peace in your name and told him of the constant prayers of yourself and your whole church on his behalf. 'Please thank these dear brethren,' he said, 'and tell them I am refreshed by their

remembrance'. Then shortly after, not without tears, he said: 'Lord, preserve thy faithful servants and hear their prayers, but in such a way that, if it please thee, I may soon be with thee.' So this good man gradually fails, but not without the most acute pain, which, however, by God's grace he endures with incredible patience, unceasingly committing himself to the Lord. Meanwhile we groan and bewail our bereavement, but we trust in the Lord, hoping that he will assist us all the more powerfully in accordance with our own powerlessness.

In his *Life of Calvin* Beza tells us that these last days of Calvin's illness were a continual prayer and that the words of Psalm 39 were frequently on his lips: 'I keep silence, Lord, because this is thy doing.' On May 27 1564, three days after this letter was sent, Calvin departed this life to be with his Lord and Saviour whom he had served so remarkably and singlemindedly during his earthly pilgrimage.

'Now at last, my brother, this most grievous wound, which only the Lord will heal, has had to be borne,' Beza writes to Haller on June 13. 'Our dear father has gone to his eternal rest, brave and blessed both in life and in death, while the devil vainly assailed him.' And the following day to Bullinger:

No doubt you have already heard the news of the death of our brother Calvin, who on the 27th of last month, in the evening, peacefully and blessedly fell asleep in the Lord sustained by the hands of his friends. Alas, my father, how great a light that day lost for us! The following day he was carried out for burial amid the extreme and unfeigned grief of the whole city. But this account must suffice for the moment; for you will concede this much to my grief that, while I feel the greatest possible consolation in the Lord, when writing of these things there are moments when I cannot restrain the onset of the most acute sorrow. The opportunity will be given us, I am sure, to describe more fully both the life and the death of my very dear father. Meanwhile I pray that more and more you will commend to God this church and especially me on whom this unwanted burden now rests.

Beza describes (in the *Life*) how Calvin's death was universally lamented throughout the city-state and how the funeral was attended not only by the senators, pastors, and professors of Geneva but also by almost the whole population, many of them in tears. Calvin's body, placed in accordance with his own explicit wishes in a coffin of the cheapest wood, was buried without any kind of pomp or ceremony in the public churchyard in a grave unmarked by tombstone or identification of any sort. His end was of a piece with his life, for, as Jean Cadier has observed, he who throughout his life had insisted that all the glory belongs to God alone was true to his principle even at and after his death, when he desired no glory for himself (see *Calvin: L'homme que Dieu a dompté*, p. 177).

Beza the poet

THE theme of *Abraham sacrificiant* is, as the title indicates, the story of the testing of Abraham by the command to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22). What was it that made him choose this theme? Eugénie Droz has suggested that the original impulse may be attributed to a picture representing Abraham sacrificing Isaac which hung in the home of his uncle Claude in Picardy and which must have become familiar to the young Beza on the occasions when he stayed there. With his interest in the Parisian theatre, too, it is probable that he was acquainted with the dramatisation of this episode in the medieval mystery plays such as the *Mistère du Viel Testament* which was staged in Paris in 1542, and also with the Latin treatment of the theme by the German author Ziegler (1543) and the Belgian author Philicinus (1546), both Roman Catholics. But Beza had no liking for medieval theatre with its coarseness and buffoonery and his indebtedness to it and to contemporary Latin publications was no more than peripheral. The editors of this new edition of *Abraham sacrificiant* rightly describe it, indeed, as 'the first classical tragedy of the French language, since it is Beza who was the first to bring on the scene an original tragedy in French, whereas his predecessors had only written in Latin or translated from Latin, and who wished not only to ally himself with the movement designed to render the French language a rival to the languages of antiquity but also to instruct and encourage his co-religionists in their mother tongue'.

Far more likely to have influenced Beza towards the choice of this subject was a number of treatises from the pen of Calvin which were published between the years 1537 and 1545 and were intended as a dissuasive against the custom of some who kept their acceptance of the evangelical faith secret by continuing to attend the services of the papists, and especially the mass. The custom was prevalent in the capital city of France in particular at this time, and it is virtually certain that Beza belonged to the number of these 'Nicodemites' (or 'Pseudonicodemites') for whose benefit Calvin put pen to paper. Thus in the first of two lengthy epistles to an anonymous friend Calvin speaks of the mass as

abominable idolatry, when bread is pretended to assume divinity and is raised on high as God for the worship and adoration of all—something so atrocious and shameful that it has to be seen to be believed . . . a little crust of bread, I say, is exhibited, adored, and invoked as God, in fact is believed to be God, a thing which even the Gentiles never imagined of their effigies.

In the concluding section of the same letter Calvin advises:

Consider it, then, a thing altogether forbidden for anyone to see you communicating in the sacrilege of the mass or uncovering your head in the presence of an image or in any way observing any of those superstitions

by which the glory of God is obscured, his religion profaned, and his truth corrupted.

To follow such advice meant laying oneself open to the peril of imprisonment, torture, and death. But Calvin's counsel was not that of a man who was unprepared to suffer for his faith.

The things which I set before you [he adds] are not those which I have meditated by myself in my sheltered refuge, but those to which the invincible martyrs of God always subjected themselves in the midst of tortures, burnings, and the savagings of wild beasts. . . . They did not set us an example of constancy in affirming the truth in order that we should now desert it, handed down to us as it is with the witness and seal of their blood; but they have taught us the art by which, supported by the Lord's protection, we stand unconquerable against the whole battle-line of death, hell, the world, and Satan.

Words like these must have disturbed and challenged Beza as he struggled to come to an open profession of the Gospel. Then in 1543 there appeared another treatise by Calvin on the avoidance of superstitions which are repugnant to the sincere confession of the faith (*De vitandis superstitionibus quae cum sincera fidei confessione pugnant*), in which the following significant passage occurs:

What would happen if everybody openly professed themselves servants of God? I reply that if it should please God it would result in savage persecutions; and that some would be compelled to rescue themselves by flight, as it were from shipwreck, leaving behind their fortunes, others would be torn apart by the reproaches of all, others would be thrown into captivity, others would be driven into exile, and still others would be cruelly murdered, but only in so far as God permitted this to the rage of wicked men. But we must give this honour to God, that we should leave the outcome to him, trusting that he will prevent anything coming about which is contrary to his choice. This is the conclusion to which our father Abraham leads us by his example, who, when he was commanded to sacrifice his own son, and on being asked as they went on their way where the sacrifice was, replied, 'God will provide, my son'. A glorious sentiment, and one that ought to be engraved on our hearts so that we may have it in mind whenever we are in a state of perplexity and unable to find a way out!

As the editors say, there is every possibility that the reading of these treatises made a decisive impression on Beza. Certainly, the experience of Abraham was to become the experience of Beza as he left behind the great city of Paris with its sophisticated attractions and left behind also his family and his possessions having at last determined to identify himself openly with the cause of the Gospel, no matter how greatly it might cost him personally.

Essentially, then, *Abraham sacrificiant* must be seen as an autobiographical document. This is the truest understanding of its source: biblical and existential. Seen in this light, it is the opposite of surprising that it was the first thing he wrote after putting into action his

decision to turn his back on the old nicodemite life. In this understanding we have a key to the whole work. Furthermore, it may be seen as a tract for the times designed to encourage others to follow the example of Abraham and burn their bridges behind them.

The work, then, is more than a literary curio of the sixteenth century. It illuminates the struggle that was taking place in the heart of many a man and woman in those dangerous and decisive days. The extreme simplicity of its language and conception is calculated to appeal to the widest possible audience. Indeed, the versification not infrequently seems over-simple and artistically naive; but any deficiency of this order is more than compensated for by the intensity of feeling and the ardour of faith by which the work is permeated.

Such evidence as there is indicates that the drama was written for presentation by the students of the Academy of Lausanne at their graduation ceremonies and that it was first performed in the Cathedral of Saint Pierre in that city. Including the original edition of 1550, there were no less than twelve editions of the work before the end of the century, a fact which suggests that it was by no means an ineffective piece of writing.

Beza's foreword to the work opens on an autobiographical note:

Some two years ago God gave me the grace to abandon the country in which he is persecuted so that I might serve him according to his holy will, and during this time, because in my afflictions a variety of imaginations presented themselves to my mind, I had recourse to the Word of the Lord. In it I found two things which marvellously consoled me: the one was an infinity of promises proceeding from the mouth of him who is the truth itself and whose word is always efficacious; the other is a multitude of examples, the least of which is sufficient not only to embolden but also to render invincible the world's most feeble and discouraged persons.

And he expresses his solicitation for the friends and acquaintances he had left behind in France:

May it please God that the many good souls I know in France, instead of amusing themselves with these unfortunate inventions or imitations of empty and dishonest imaginings (if one is to judge them truly), may be concerned rather to magnify the goodness of this great God, from whom they have received so many blessings, and may cease flattering their idols, that is to say their lords and ladies, whom they encourage in their vices by their deceits and flatteries.

The words of Abraham's opening monologue might equally well have come from the lips of Beza himself, or for that matter of any number of others who for the sake of the Gospel had suffered the loss of all things:

Depuis que j'ay mon païs delaissé,
Et de courir çà et là n'ay cessé,
Helas mon Dieu, est il encor' un homme,
Qui ait porté de travaux telle somme?

Depuis le temps que tu m'as retiré
 Hors de pals ou tu n'es adoré,
 Hélas mon Dieu, est il encor' un homme,
 Qui ait receu de biens si grande somme?
 Voila comment par les calamitez,
 Tu fais cognoistre auz hommes tes bontez.

Las j'ay vescu septante et cinq années,
 Suyvant le cours de tes predestinées,
 Qui ont voulu que prinsse ma naissance,
 D'une maison riche par suffisance,
 Mais quel bien peult l'homme de dien avoir,
 S'il est contrainct, contrainct (dy-je) de veoir
 En lieu de toy, qui terre et cieulx as faicts,
 Craindre et servir mille dieux contrefaicts?
 Or donc sortir tu me fis de ces lieux,
 Laisser mes biens, mes parens, et leurs dieux,
 Incontinent que j'eus ouy ta voix.
 Mesmes tu scais que point je ne scavois,
 En quel endroict tu me voulois conduire:
 Mais qui te suyt, mon Dieu, il peult bien dire,
 Qu'il va tout droict: et tenant ceste voye,
 Craindre ne doit que jamais il fourvoye. (49-79)

Later there comes a stichomythic exchange between Abraham and Sarah, in which Abraham, though deeply perplexed, is displayed as the man of strong faith, while Sarah is tormented by doubt and despair as she contemplates the fate proposed for Isaac, their only child and the son of the promise:

Sarah
 Mais Dieu veult'il qu'on le hazarde?

Abraham
 Hazardé n'est point qui Dieu garde.

Sarah
 Je me doubte de quelque cas.

Abraham
 Quant à moy je n'en doubte pas.

Sarah
 C'est quelque entreprise secrette.

Abraham
 Mais telle qu'elle est, Dieu l'a faicte.

Sarah
 Aumoins si vous scaviez ou c'est.

Abraham
 Bien tost le scauray si Dieu plaist.

Sarah
 Il n'ira jamais jusques là.

Abraham

Dieu pourvoira à tout cela.

Sarah

Mais les chemins sont dangereux.

Abraham

Qui meurt suyvant Dieu, est heureux.

Sarah

S'il meurt, nous voila demeurez.

Abraham

Les mots de Dieu sont asseurez. (443-456)

In due course Abraham and Isaac set off for the appointed destination, accompanied by a band of shepherds, divided into two sections, who form a sort of double chorus. Other characters are Satan, who observes and from time to time makes pointed comments from the background, and the angel who finally intervenes and stays the patriarch's hand as he is about to slay his son. The tension mounts as Abraham, in an extremity of anguish, yet constantly trusting in the goodness of God and the faithfulness of his promises, prepares to do as he had been bidden:

Puis qu'il te plaist, ô Dieu, il est certain,
Que c'est raison: parquoy je le feray.

Mais le faisant, je ferois Dieu menteur.
Car il m'a dict, qu'il me feroit cest heur
Que de mon filz Isac il sortiroit
Un peuple grand qui la terre empliroit.
Isac tué, l'alliance est desfaicte! (740-747)

He asks that if it must be at least Isaac may be put to death by a hand other than his. But then faith signally triumphs over doubt. Who is he to question God? It is through God's power and goodness that he received Isaac, and God is well able to restore him from the dead:

Que dy-je? ou suis-je? ô Dieu mon createur,
Ne suis-je pas ton loyal serviteur?
Ne m'as tu pas de mon país tiré?
Ne m'as tu pas tant de fois asseuré
Que ceste terre aux miens estoit donnée?
Ne m'as tu pas donné ceste lignée,
En m'asseurant que d'Isac sortiroit
Un peuple tien qui la terre empliroit?
Si donc tu veulx mon Isac emprunter,
Que me fault-il contre toy disputer?
Il est à toy: mais de toy je l'ay pris:
Et pour autant quand tu l'auras repris,
Ressusciter plustost tu le feras,
Que ne m'advint ce que promis tu m'as,
Mais, ô Seigneur, tu scais qu'homme je suis,

Executer rien de bon je ne puis,
 Non pas penser, mais ta force invincible
 Fait qu'au croyant il n'est rien impossible.
 Arriere chair, arriere affections:
 Retirez vous humaines passions,
 Rien ne m'est bon, rien ne m'est raisonnable,
 Que ce qui est au Seigneur agreable. (797-819)

The epilogue concludes with a prayer that all may heed and practise the living faith of which Abraham was so notable an example:

Or toy grand Dieu, qui nous as fait cognoistre
 Les grans abuz esquels nous voyons estre
 Le povre monde, helas, tant perverty,
 Fay qu'un chacun de nous soit adverty
 En son endroit, de tourner en usage
 La vive foy de ce saint personnage.

The simplicity of the piece is characteristic of the desire of the Reformers to communicate the truth to their audience, to express their message in a language that would readily be grasped by all, including the humblest, of their listeners. The sincerity of the piece flows from deep personal conviction and experience of the faithfulness of God and his promises. Between Beza's time and ours there have been other and greater poets of the faith, but where are the poets of the faith for our day?