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Calvin’s Jewish Interlocutor: Christian Hebraism and Anti-Jewish Polemics during the Reformation

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Calvin’s Jewish Interlocutor:
Christian Hebraism and Anti-Jewish Polemics during the Reformation

The nature of Calvin’s tractate Responis to questions and objections of a certain Jew (Ad quaestiones et obiecta Judaei cuiusdam responsio) has long been a matter of some dispute among Calvin scholars. The nineteenth-century editors of Calvin’s works considered the book to be “meager and weak,” no doubt assuming that Calvin was responsible for composing both the questions and answers.1 In the twentieth century, scholars have been more inclined to see some evidence of an actual dispute between a Jew and a Christian in the book. Most notably Salo Baron suggested that the work reflects an exchange that Josel of Rosheim claimed to have had with a Christian theologian at Frankfurt in 1539. Josel reported that the theologian “attacked him in a violent, angry, and menacing harangue,” to which he responded: “You, a learned man, wish to threaten us poor people? God, our Lord, has preserved us from the days of Abraham. He in his grace will doubtless preserve us from you.”2 Baron’s identification of the Jewish questioner with Josel and the Christian with Calvin, while incorrect, underscores how important the identity of Calvin’s interlocutor is for interpreting this enigmatic work. Since Calvin’s Response contains his only discussion of Jewish objections to Christianity, it is significant for understanding his opinion of the Jews and Judaism. By determining who wrote the questions we can better discern Calvin’s image of the Jews and how seriously he took their objections to Christianity.3


3. Mary Sweetland Laver, for example, thinks that Calvin’s Ad Quaestiones is of secondary importance in understanding Calvin’s view of the Jews. She forcefully argues that he had no “view of Jews
Calvin wrote the book in a question-answer format, allowing his Jewish interlocutor to pose 23 questions and answering each one in turn. As it stands the work is an unfinished torso, lacking introduction, conclusion, or any explicit clue as to when or why it was written. Calvin apparently intended to publish it, since in one passage he turned briefly from polemics to give a short explanation of the phrase “sons of God” as it is used in the Old Testament. He did this, he said, “to instruct the simple,” clearly assuming that others would read it.\(^4\) Beza published the unfinished treatise with Calvin’s letters after the latter died, which gave rise to speculation that Calvin had been in contact with his Jewish questioner by letter.\(^5\)

Before considering further the provenance of the book, let us turn to its content. Calvin himself chose to answer these questions, whoever first posed them, and they are worth considering for the role they play within this treatise quite apart from their authorship. The interlocutor tried to call elements of Christian belief into question by alleging contradictions in Christian dogma, drawing attention to inconsistencies between the Gospel accounts of Jesus and Jesus the Son of God as understood by Christian theologians, and making sarcastic jibes at a few apparent inconsistencies between biblical teaching and Christian practice.\(^6\) In the first question, for example, he demanded to know how Christians could claim that “Jesus came to cleanse men of sins and lead them out of hell,” when in fact he “increased the sin of the Jews who crucified him.”\(^7\) The interlocutor argued by implication that Jesus’ mission had failed. In question 18 he expressed doubt about Jesus’ divinity. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering be taken from him, he noted the implication that Jesus’s will differed from God the Father’s. “Therefore,” he concluded, “their wills are not alike,” raising doubts about Jesus’ divinity and his unity with the Father.\(^8\) Finally, (in question no. 12) he asked whether any Christian had faith even the size of a mustard seed.

It is written that if anyone, has faith in Jesus, even as slight as a grain of mustard, he will be able, by speaking, to move a mountain from its place. But we see that even the holiest of them cannot move anything, however light. And how much less can the masses do? This being the case, they possess no power or dominion by which they might excel in any way, although they believe in him.\(^9\)

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4. All quotations from Ad quaestiones have been taken from the English translation of the book made by Rabbi Susan Frank, which was included by Laver in her dissertation as an appendix. *Ibid.*, p. 239 (Question 7).


Each question assumed the falsity of Christianity, and was delivered in a snide tone which offended Calvin. The questions also reveal that the interlocutor was familiar with both Christian theology and the Gospels themselves.\textsuperscript{10} Twenty of the 23 questions allude to either specific passages within the Gospels, usually Matthew, or discuss important themes from them, such as the meaning of the title “Son of God.”\textsuperscript{11} In fact questions 2–20 appear to follow the order of the Gospel of Matthew, chaps. 5–28.\textsuperscript{12}

Calvin did not pose these questions to give an anonymous Jewish spokesman a chance to speak, but rather to refute the charges implicit in each query and to clarify the problems raised by placing them in what he considered a proper theological context. Each answer Calvin gave consists of two parts: first he pointed out that the difficulty raised by the questioner was already present in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. Calvin tried to show that the questioner did not understand his own Scriptures when he objected to similar incongruities in Christianity. Then Calvin provided an answer which took into account the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and Christ’s role in bringing both together.\textsuperscript{13} So, for example, in response to the view that Jesus’ death had the effect of heaping guilt on the Jews instead of resulting in their forgiveness, Calvin asked,

\begin{quote}
Answer me this in turn: How can the Law be said to have been given for salvation when in fact it increased transgressions and indictment? For it is clear that the Jews at once violated the covenant of God and greatly provoked God’s wrath against themselves by violating the justice of the law.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Then he went on to summarize the traditional Christian position that the prophets had predicted Israel’s rejection of the Messiah. He concluded that “God’s grace does not always profit men. On the contrary, it sometimes makes things twice as bad, when it is improperly profaned.”\textsuperscript{15} Strikingly absent from Calvin’s answer is any hint that the Jews somehow bore an extra measure of guilt for being “Christ-killers.” Although the interlocutor framed his question in these terms, Calvin did not make the slightest allusion to it. In this respect at least Jews were one more group in the host of unbelievers, rather than the victims of a special divine curse. Calvin’s response to the question about whether God the Father and Jesus had the same will was more strictly theological. He began by asking how

\begin{quote}
God could say that he did not desire the death of a sinner, while at the same time he destined sinners to destruction, saying to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and compassion to those to whom I will show compassion”? For,
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item[10.] Baron, “Calvin,” p. 155.
\item[11.] The only four questions which do not in some way relate to the Gospels are nos. 1, 4, and 5.
\item[12.] Only question 13 is out of sequence. See Appendix.
\item[13.] Laver, “Calvin,” p. 223.
\item[14.] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 229 (Q. 1).
\item[15.] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 254 (Q. 1).
\end{itemize}
reserving to his own decision every judgment about saving or damning men, he
does not show himself giving the spirit of repentance to all.  

God could and did have desires in the Old Testament which appeared to be
in conflict with each other. Then Calvin went on to explain that Christ, af-
after his incarnation, had not only a human body but human feelings as well.
“Therefore he possessed a will distinct from the Father’s because he wanted
no feature that was proper to human kind to be alien to himself.”  

He concluded that it did not undercut the divinity of Christ to assert that he and
God the Father had separate wills.

On the question of faith the size of a mustard seed, Calvin responded
with a series of offensive questions of his own which illustrated how men’s
unfaithfulness can bring certain divine promises to naught:

It is written of Mount Zion “This is my resting place forever. Here I will dwell since
I have chosen it.” This emptiness and desolation which has lasted so many centu-
ries, what good is it to him? And tell me, why did he wish that they should wan-
der, miserably scattered around the world, that they should lie prostrate in their ru-
ins, when Isaiah announced that they would be redeemed from Babylonian exile to
restore the ruins of the whole world and gather all the dispersed into their body?  

Calvin then went on to say that if the Jews had a “grain of wit or sane intel-
ligence they would recognize that the word of Christ in which they hunt for
meaninglessness is the very truth.” The faith Jesus discusses here is not sav-
ing faith, but the “faith with which it was proper for the apostles to embrace
the office laid on them, to sanctify with miracles the new teaching of the gos-
pel which had not yet been accepted by the general public.” The gift of work-
ing miracles was not given indiscriminately even in the first generation of the
Christian church. In any case, a lack of faith on the part of Jesus’ followers
was hardly a reflection on Christ himself.

This third example also shows that Calvin was not engaging in a dis-
passionate examination of questions raised by a disinterested party. Calvin
cheerfully returned insult for insult and made every effort to give back bet-
ter than he got. Did Calvin create a rather lively straw man, as he did in some
of his other polemical books, who would bear the brunt of his rhetoric and be
crushed in the end?  

The offensive nature of the questions attests either to
Calvin’s willingness to attribute tremendous hostility to a fictive Jewish in-
terlocutor or provides an authentic example of Calvin’s apologetic writing
in response to unusually searching questions. Despite all that can be gleaned
from analyzing the form and content of the book, it remains impervious to in-
terpretation unless the identity of the interlocutor can be established. Fortu-
nately he can be identified, if not by name.

17. Ibid., p. 255.
18. Ibid., pp. 245-246.
20. Francis M. Higman, The Style of John Calvin in his French Polemical Treatises (Oxford Univ. Press,
Calvin’s interlocutor was neither one of Calvin’s contemporaries nor Calvin himself writing in a different persona, but the author of Sefer Nizzahon, which translated means The Book of Victory. Nizzahon is a Jewish polemical anthology probably written in Germany during the fourteenth century. It had acquired a particularly evil reputation among Christians even before the Reformation began. It was one of only two books that Reuchlin considered worthy of suppression in his famous legal opinion on Jewish books. Reuchlin made this judgment on the basis of first-hand acquaintance with the book. His manuscript copy, which was unfortunately destroyed during the Second World War, contained many ill-tempered marginal responses to some of the more outrageous remarks made by its author.

Despite the book’s reputation, or perhaps because of it, a number of Christian Hebraists went to great lengths to acquire their own copies. Sebastian Münster made his own copy of Reuchlin’s original between 1511 and 1514, and he printed 65 excerpts from it in the annotations to his Hebrew Latin diglot Bible and his Hebrew-Latin diglot of the Gospel of Matthew. Wolfgang Capito may also have had a copy of the book, probably also copied from Reuchlin’s original. Immanuel Tremellius brought his own manuscript of the book from Italy. The anonymous Jewish convert who wrote an apologetic work in Hebrew entitled The Book of Faith (Sefer Amana) quoted at some length from Nizzahon in his rebuttal of traditional Jewish objections to Christianity. Paul Fagius translated The Book of Faith into Latin and printed both the translation and Hebrew original in 1542. Nizzahon was thus available to

some Christian Hebraists in its entirety, and excerpts of it were available to a much wider reading public.

Although Calvin may have had the chance to examine the entire work in manuscript, since he was personally acquainted with both Sebastian Münster and Immanuel Tremellius, he actually responded to quotations from Nizzahon printed by Sebastian Münster with his annotations on the Gospel of Matthew.28 There are several reasons which suggest that Münster’s work was the source of Calvin’s questions. First, all except two of Calvin’s questions are to be found in Münster’s annotations. Münster included the Hebrew quotations in his notes, sometimes with a Latin summary. Calvin’s wording suggests that he translated the questions from the Hebrew.29 Calvin also responded to the questions largely in the order that Münster printed them.30 Finally, one of the questions cited by Calvin was taken not from Nizzahon, but from the Book of Faith, and this question also appears in Münster’s annotations on Matthew.31 Thus it is safe to assume that Calvin confronted the challenge of Nizzahon through Münster’s quotations in his Gospel of Matthew. Since neither Münster nor Calvin knew who wrote Nizzahon, Calvin responded to the objections of “a certain Jew.”32

Having identified Calvin’s Jewish interlocutor it is now possible to search for correspondences within his other works and to limit the date of its composition more narrowly. Since Calvin responded to quotations of Nizzahon printed in Münster’s annotations to Gospel of Matthew, Calvin’s commentary on the synoptic Gospels (1555) would be an obvious place to look for parallel passages. There are several parallels between Calvin’s answers in his Response and his commentary on corresponding verses, but there are no references to his interlocutor’s objections. The most obvious example is Calvin’s response to question 10:

28. Jerome Friedman noted that Münster responded to genuine Jewish objections to Christianity in his Evangelium secundum Matthaeum in Lingua Hebraica, cum versione latina atque succinctis annotationibus (Basel, Henric-Petri, 1537), but thought that he derived them from David Kimhi’s Psalms Commentary of his Answers to Christians. Most Ancient Testimony, p. 224.

29. Calvin’s use of Nizzahon sheds some light on his abilities as a Hebraist. The Hebrew of Nizzahon is not very different from biblical Hebrew and would have presented few problems for Calvin to read and translate. For a discussion of the extent of Calvin’s Hebrew abilities, see Laver, “Calvin,” pp. 183-184.

30. The only questions that are not quotations from Münster’s work are nos. 19 and 22. The former is quite similar to questions 17-18 and might have simply been derived from them. Question 22 concerns the problem of reconciling God’s sovereignty and Judas’s responsibility in the betrayal of Christ, a subject of enduring interest to Calvin. Sefer Nizzahon also raises this problem in a pericope that was not quoted by Münster, although not in the same way that Calvin did (para 108). Calvin may also have derived the two questions from his harmony on the Gospels.


32. Sefer Nizzahon (Vetus) is occasionally confused with Yom Lipmann Mühlhausen’s work of the same name, but is older and its author is unknown. Berger, The Jewish Christian Debate, pp. 33-35.
Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. And Jesus was in the earth for three days and three nights. This is not true. Even according to your own words he was in the earth only three days and two nights.

Calvin responded both here and in his Gospels commentary that Jesus was employing a synecdoche, by which the part stands for the whole. He wrote: “In exempla full conformity is not essential, nor is it rendered useless if something not quite matching is used.” In his commentary, however, Calvin did not attack his Jewish contemporaries for their unbelief, but instead focused on Jesus’s contemporaries. He wrote that Jesus “pronounces the Jews — or at least the scribes and those who resembled them — to be a wicked nation ...” In his commentary Calvin discussed the two questions that were not derived from Münster’s annotations. These concern the relationship between God’s sovereignty and Judas’s guilt, and whether Jesus had one will or two. The commentary identifies these objectors as Christians rather than Jews. Indeed, Calvin attributes the question about Christ’s will to seventh century Monothelite heretics rather than to any Jewish objection. Calvin’s references to ideas that he discussed in this Gospels commentary suggest that he wrote the Response after 1555. He may not have interacted with passages from Nizzahon in his Gospels commentary because he had not read them in 1555, but it is more likely that he ignored them because they had no place in his theological agenda, as evidence from several of his other commentaries suggests.

Calvin’s familiarity with Sebastian Münster’s commentary on Matthew also raises the question of how extensively Calvin used it and his Hebrew Bible in his Old Testament commentaries. Henry Walter, a nineteenth century annotator of Calvin’s Pentateuch commentary, stated that all of Calvin’s citations of Jewish sources came from Münster’s Bible. More recently H.F. van Rooy has suggested that Calvin made some use of Münster’s Bible in his Genesis commentary (1554). If Calvin did use Münster’s Bible as a source for his Genesis commentary he did not refer to any of Münster’s Nizzahon quotations. Likewise, if Calvin used Münster’s Bible as a source for his Psalms commentary (1557) then he ignored the latter’s quotations from

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Nizzahon. In fact, Calvin made few overt references to Jewish interpreters or opinion in his Psalms commentary. This omission must have been intentional, since he made extensive use of Martin Bucer’s Psalms commentary and the latter interacted vigorously with medieval Jewish commentators such as Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and David Kimhi, particularly when explaining important messianic passages such as Psalm 22. Calvin acknowledged the importance of Jewish exegesis only indirectly by urging restraint in christological exegesis of the Old Testament, much as Bucer had done in his commentary. Calvin wrote in his discussion of Psalm 72:1: “We must always be careful not to give the Jews any reason to claim that we split hairs in order to find a reference to Christ in passages not directly related to him.” Calvin’s respect for Jewish opinion evaporated, however, when it denied the truth of Christianity as his interlocutor did in the Response. Calvin’s disregard for Jewish polemics in his commentaries supports Laver’s argument that Calvin’s use of Israel and the Jews in his exegetical works was intended to encourage Christian nurture and to bolster his attacks on the Anabaptists and Catholics.

Since Calvin was clearly responding to questions posed by a Jewish author in his Response, his answers reflect his opinions of the Jews and their objections to Christianity. Before determining Calvin’s attitude toward the Jews, however, a word is in order about his use of defamatory rhetoric. Calvin’s descriptions of his Christian opponents were nearly always abusive to the core. He frequently called them pigs and dogs, but on occasion used much cruder characterizations. On occasion he likened them to prostitutes, thieves, or vomiting drunkards, and in other places he employed images of defecation, latrines, and sewage. Calvin once went so far as to associate the statements of one Anabaptist opponent with vomit, and the speaker with “a drunkard in his cups.”

39. According to Berger, Münster quoted from Nizzahon paras. 128 (Ps. 2), 143 (Ps. 19), 144 (Ps. 21), 145 (Ps. 22), 151 (Ps. 86), and 152 (Ps. 110). Cf. Calvin, Commentarii in librum Psalmorum, Opera, v. 31, cols. 41-52 (Ps. 2), cols. 194-207 (Ps. 19), cols. 212-237 (Ps. 21-22), cols. 791-798 (Ps. 86); vol. 32, cols. 159-166 (Ps. 110).


41. Ibid., pp. 151, 155, 160.


43. Hobbs suggested that Bucer’s motives for using Jewish exegetes were also more influenced by apologetic than missionary concerns. “Bucer,” p. 162.


45. Higman, Style, pp. 148-149. Higman’s discussion focuses on Calvin’s French language polemics, none of which addressed Jewish opponents.

46. Ibid., p. 150.
Since Calvin treated other Christians this way, how did his Jewish interlocutor fare? Calvin used some terms of abuse in his answers, describing his Jewish questioner or Jews in general as “sheep,” “pigs,” “dogs,” and “brutes.” He characterized his opponent as “impudent” and “arrogant” since the latter in effect demanded that God behave not according to his sovereign will, but rather as he the questioner expected. Since these insults were similar to those Calvin heaped on Christian opponents they do not shed much light upon what he thought of the Jews specifically. In this instance Calvin was probably not so concerned with defaming the character of his (anonymous) opponent as with belittling his objections. Accordingly he focused his abuse on the intellectual and spiritual state of the Jews and did not use his crudest diction and imagery.

Calvin sought to discredit his interlocutor and the Jews in general by denigrating their spiritual and intellectual capacities and ridiculing their objections to Christianity. To Calvin the very questions that the interlocutor raised demonstrated the Jews’ spiritual state. He characterized the Jews as “blind,” “stupid,” and “foolish.” Calvin thought that they suffered from a form of “madness” or “insanity,” since they did not have enough sense to understand their own Bible. The Jews sought to evade their responsibility before God to acknowledge Christ as the Messiah by raising foolish objections. The objections themselves Calvin described as “stinking cavils,” ridiculous, nonsensical, and frivolous. Nonetheless, Calvin realized that while he himself was unmoved by the Jewish objections, they might raise doubts in the minds of other Christian readers. He may have been moved to write his treatise to offer a better apologetic response to Nizzahon than Münster had.

There are indications that Calvin may not have been the only Protestant theologian who was provoked by the writer of Nizzahon, encountered at second hand through Münster’s quotations. Martin Luther was familiar with both Münster’s Hebrew Bible and his Hebrew Gospel of Matthew. In his most famous anti-Jewish book On the Jews and their Lies (1543), Luther complained about a “certain Jewish author” quoted by Münster in his Hebrew Bible, who referred to the Virgin Mary by the derisive name “Haria,” that is “excrement.” This was the normal way that the author of Nizzahon referred to Mary. Radical Protestant Michael Servetus called

49. Ibid., blind: 261; foolish: 258; stupid: 246, 248.
50. Ibid., pp. 248, 255.
51. Ibid., p. 236.
52. Ibid., pp. 237, 244-245, 257.
the author of *Nizzahon* a “perfidious creature” when he discussed Genesis 49:10. Münster also included this passage in the annotations of his Bible.\(^{55}\) Since Münster’s Bible was used so widely by Protestants it is safe to assume that many lesser-known theologians were also exposed to ideas expressed in *Nizzahon*.\(^{56}\)

The identity of Calvin’s Jewish interlocutor illustrates how much is still unknown about Hebrew learning among Christians during the Reformation and the entire early modern period. Until the past decade scholars have emphasized the importance of medieval anti-Jewish polemics in shaping the attitudes of Protestant theologians toward the Jews, leavened now and again by discussions with Jewish tutors such as Elias Levi or statesmen such as Josel of Rosheim. More recently Jerome Friedman, R. Gerald Hobbs, and Hans-Martin Kirn have pointed out that many Christian Hebraists and exegetes had read Hebrew language anti-Christian polemics. The best known representatives of this tradition were David Kimhi’s Psalms Commentary and his *Answer to the Christians*, *Sefer Nizzahon*, and the *Toledot Yesu*, a defamatory life of Jesus.\(^{57}\) The overall effect that these anti-Christian polemics had in shaping the rhetoric and argumentation of Reformation-era anti-Jewish polemics has yet to be measured. It is worth asking whether Christian polemicists were at times motivated by apologetic concerns in their works as well as purely anti-Jewish animus.\(^{58}\) To what extent did Protestant theologians such as Luther project the aggressive, combative persona of the author of *Nizzahon* onto the Jews of their day?\(^{59}\) Calvin’s *Response* shows that he was inclined to identify the pugnacious stance and opinions of his interlocutor with those of his Jewish contemporaries.

More broadly Calvin’s encounter with a medieval Jewish polemical work and his ability to read it illustrate how much research remains to be done on the penetration of Hebrew learning into Christian theological and academic circles. The explosive growth of Hebrew studies within schools and univer-
sities during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cannot be explained
without discussing the emergence and growth of a philological apparatus,
Hebrew printing industry and distribution system, and a rationale for appro-
priating post-biblical Jewish literature for Christian purposes, all of which de-
veloped during the sixteenth century and made it possible for Christians to
learn biblical and rabbinical Hebrew from other Christians within the confes-
sionally restricted academic world.\(^{60}\) The questions posed by Calvin’s in-
terlocutor illustrate both the extent of Christian knowledge of the Jewish tradi-
tion and the increasing ability of Christians to interact with it independently
of the Jews.

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Appendix: Index of Quotations in Calvin’s Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Nizzahon Citation(^{61})</th>
<th>Matthew Citation</th>
<th>Münster Matthew page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Para 195</td>
<td>Mt 1</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Para 172, 221</td>
<td>Mt 5</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Para 168</td>
<td>Mt 8</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Para 210</td>
<td>Mt 8</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Para 226</td>
<td>Mt 9</td>
<td>72-73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Para 193</td>
<td>Mt 9</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Para 193</td>
<td>Mt 9</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Para 85</td>
<td>Mt 10.34</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Para 9</td>
<td>Mt 4</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Para 201</td>
<td>Mt 16</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Para 44, 46</td>
<td>Mt 17</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Para 203</td>
<td>Mt 17</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Mt 21.1-11</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Para 162</td>
<td>Mt 4.1-11</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Para 16</td>
<td>Mt 26</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Para 175</td>
<td>Mt 26</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Para 176</td>
<td>Mt 26.37-39</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Para 176</td>
<td>Mt 26</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Mt 26.36-42</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Para 182</td>
<td>Mt 28.18-20</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Para 222</td>
<td>Mt 27</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Mt 26</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Para 191</td>
<td>Mt 21</td>
<td>119-120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{60}\) Jerome Friedman discusses the first stages of these developments in *Most Ancient Testimony*, pp. 20-49.

\(^{61}\) Three of the twenty three questions were not direct quotations from Nizzahon. These are no. 13 which was taken from *Sefer Amana*, Basel, UB Ms R IV 3, f. 26b, para 31 in the printed version (Isny, Fagius, 1542) and nos. 19 and 22 which Calvin probably posed for himself, perhaps based on Nizzahon questions.