

Note on the Historical and Textual Background  
of the  
II Samuel Sermons  
by  
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One of Calvin's major tasks in Geneva was preaching. Ford Lewis Battles wrote: "From the time of his call to the post of teacher and preacher at Geneva, and beginning 1 September 1536, he undertook an arduous preaching schedule which during the brief but pastorally and ecclesiastically important Strasbourg sojourn was transferred to his French congregation there. Calvin was an extempore preacher; while thoroughly prepared, he did not apparently bring a sermon manuscript into the pulpit."<sup>1</sup>

According to T.H.L. Parker:

Under the church constitution in Geneva, Les Ordonnances ecclesiastiques de l'Eglise de Geneve, preaching was to take place in the various churches thrice on Sundays and once every other day of the week. This was increased in 1549 to every day. Calvin took his part in the regular scheme by preaching twice on Sundays and once daily in alternate weeks. Only illness or absence prevented his fulfilling the obligation. He followed a rule, from which he hardly ever deviated, of preaching on Sunday mornings on the New Testament, on Sunday afternoons on the Psalms or the New Testament, and on weekdays on the Old Testament. Moreover, he preached steadily through book after book of the Bible—200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 159 on Job, 5 on Obadiah, 110 on I Corinthians, 43 on Galatians and so on. These sermons were extemporaneous and were never committed to writing by Calvin. Before 1549 some few had been taken down by stenographers and published. But it had apparently been done only intermittently and with some difficulty.

In 1549, however, la compagnie des estrangers, the society of refugees, chiefly French, assembled in Geneva, hired a Frenchman, one Denis Raguenier, to take down all Calvin's sermons in shorthand as they were preached and afterwards to superintend their transcription. The resultant folio volumes were committed to the care of the Deacons for anyone to read. Some of them were published, the rest remained in manuscript. In this way, over 2,000 of Calvin's sermons were faithfully recorded between 1549 and his death.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>F. L. Battles, "The Future of Calviniana," in Renaissance, Reformation, Resurgence, Peter De Klerk, ed., (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1976), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup>T.H.L. Parker, Supplementa Calviniana An Account of the Manuscripts of Calvin's Sermons Now in Course or Preparation (London: The Tyndale Press, 1962), p. 8.

By the time Calvin preached the II Samuel series (1562-63) Denis Raguenier had already died (in 1560 or 61), and a group of four different scribes took down the II Samuel sermons.<sup>3</sup> During this series Calvin followed the custom mentioned above by Parker of preaching on the Old Testament on week days (including Saturdays). This II Samuel series goes straight through the text of II Samuel and consists of 87 sermons (768 pages in the printed Supplementa Calviniana edition of H. Ruckert, editor). These sermons remain in the original French of Calvin (The Sermons on I Samuel were translated into Latin before they were printed).

Probably these sermons lasted a good hour, not counting the other elements in the worship service. Though Calvin's preaching attracted large crowds, neither he nor his successors were as concerned about the longterm preservation of his sermons as they were with his other types of writing. Both T.H.L. Parker and B. Gagnebin (in the works cited) tell the remarkable story of how many of Calvin's Sermons (44 volumes of them) were nearly lost forever, so little were they esteemed by the Library of Geneva in the early 19th century (these lost volumes of course included the II Samuel Sermons).

Parker explains:

Some time during the seventeenth century the manuscripts (of the Calvin Sermons) were deposited in the Bibliothèque publique (of Geneva), first being mentioned in the catalogue of 1697, and at the end of the eighteenth century the Library possessed 44 volumes of manuscript sermons. Many of these were also in print, fortunately, and so survived the catastrophe of 1805. In this year the Librarian, Senebier, sold the lot to a couple of booksellers, and as a crowning indignity, sold them by weight...This disaster, so terrible and yet with the elements of comedy about it, was to some extent retrieved. In 1823 two theological students, brothers belonging to the famous theological family of Monod, came upon eight of the volumes in a junk shop, bought them (by weight, of course) and gave them back to the library...<sup>4</sup>

These II Samuel Sermons were not printed in the great Corpus Reformatorum (published at Brunswick from 1863 to 1897 by Baum, Cunitz, and Reuss). They remained in their difficult-to-decipher, handwritten manuscript form in the library at Geneva until well into this century.

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<sup>3</sup>Bernard Gagnebin, L'Histoire des Manuscrits Des Sermons de Calvin in Supplementa Calviniana, vol. 2, Sermons sur le livre d'Esaië, Chs. 13-29, publiés par Georges A. Barrois (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), p. xviii. See also Supplementa Calviniana, Vol. I, Johannes Calvin, Predigten über das 2 Buch Samuelis In der Ursprache nach der Genfer Handschrift herausgegeben von Hanns Ruckert (Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1936), pp. xxviff.

<sup>4</sup>op. cit., pp. 8,10.

This is how matters stood until in 1936 Professor Hanns Ruckert of Tübingen published the first Lieferung of his edition of the Series on 2 Samuel. The war interrupted publication, but Professor Ruckert took up the task again after 1945 and had the satisfaction of bringing it to an end in 1961.<sup>5</sup>

Calvin also preached 107 sermons on I Samuel and then 87 on II Samuel from 1561-63. The I Samuel sermons were printed (in Latin) in the Corpus Reformatorum.

The II Samuel Sermons have now been translated into English (that is, the first volume of them, comprising 43 sermons), and await publication.

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<sup>5</sup>Parker, op. cit., p. 11.