

Those who hold ancient writers to modern standards, find their work immeasurably simplified by the use of certain favorite yardsticks. With the textual critics this yardstick is "the best manuscript." Among a dozen or more ancient manuscripts of a text, one is certain to have fewer mistakes in it, that is, to be nearer the original form, than any of the others. Having located this one, a critic will turn to it and it alone in every case of doubt, oblivious of the fact that the best authority may at times be hopelessly wrong, just as the worst authority may be surprisingly right.

That is another way of saying that there are no authorities. But the scholars insist on acting as if there were because if they had such to appeal to, their problem of constantly having to make decisions would be solved. And so they solve it by creating the authorities to which they then appeal! This procedure drives Mr. Housman to wrathful sermons: "By this time," he writes, "it has become apparent what the modern conservative critic really is: a creature moving about in worlds not realized. His trade is one which requires, that it may be practised in perfection, two qualifications only: ignorance of language and abstinence from thought. The tenacity with which he adheres to the testimony of scribes has no relation to the trustworthiness of that testimony, but is dictated wholly by his inability to stand alone. . . ." These gentlemen, he says, "use manuscripts as drunkards use lamp-posts—not to light them on their way, but to dissimulate their instability."⁶⁷

But relatively few men work with original manuscripts. Far more common are those other yardsticks, the pet hypothesis and the official party line. Mr. Toynbee uses pet hypotheses just as textual critics use pet manuscripts: "Toynbee's images," writes M. Frankfort, "betray an evolutionistic as well as moral bias which interferes with the historian's supreme duty," since he merely "projects postulates which fulfill an emotional need in the West [i.e., his own cul-

Controlling the Past

by Dr. Hugh Nibley

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PART IV

tural standards] into human groups whose values lie elsewhere."⁶⁸ Taking his own culture as a yardstick, Toynbee has no difficulty at all in telling at a glance just how advanced or retarded everybody else has been.

This is one of the oldest and easiest games in the world, though it was not until the nineteenth century that its devotees had the effrontery to call it a science. The "evolutionistic bias" of modern scholarship has played havoc with ancient history, not only predetermining every reaction of the historian to his text, but also in most cases freeing him from any obligation towards the text at all. Many large college textbooks are brought forth by men who, it is painfully apparent, have never bothered to read through the documents on which their work is supposed to be based. Their confidence in a moth-eaten rule-of-thumb is simply sublime—why should one waste precious eyesight examining moldy evidence when everybody knows already what the answer is going to be? "Naturally," writes one of the better authorities of our time, speaking of the ancient world in general, "the earlier kingdoms were neither large nor firmly established."

What economy is here! Who would beat a weary trail to the stacks in search of early kingdoms when he can reconstruct them at will by the application of a simple and universal rule? If one knows from biological analogy that early states were *naturally* small and weak, why spoil the game by toying with evidence which might prove that *historically* they were nothing of the sort?⁶⁹

But more damaging to the past

even than the wilful and mechanical application of lazy hand-me-down "science" to its reconstruction is the rule of vanity. In the end, as Housman demonstrates at length, a scholar's right to reconstruct history or restore a battered text rests on the possession of personal gifts which escape analysis. Here is high art indeed! The expert feels in his bones that what he says is what is right, unaware that his bones have been undergoing constant conditioning since the day of his birth. He is trained and intelligent; he means to be perfectly scientific and detached; he is constitutionally incapable of wanton error; how then can he be wrong?

Answer: simply by being human! Purity of motive is no guarantee of infallibility; the greatest of errors are by no means intentional, and are often made by the ablest of scholars. Yet because Dr. Faugh means to write an honest, impartial, and objective history we are expected by his publishers to have the decency, or at least the courtesy, to believe that his history is honest, impartial, and objective. No scholar alive possesses enough knowledge to speak the final word on anything, and as to integrity, let us rather call it vanity.

After surveying the whole field of Ezekiel scholarship for the period 1933-43, W. A. Irwin came out with the flat announcement that "not a single scholar has succeeded in convincing his colleagues of the finality of his analysis of so much as one passage." Why not? Because "they have given only opinions, when the situation cries aloud for . . . evidence. . . . There is no clearly emerging recognition of a sound method by which to assault this prime problem. Every scholar goes his own way, and according to his private predilection chooses what is genuine and what is secondary in the book; and the figure and work of Ezekiel still dwell in thick darkness."⁷⁰ No common yardstick having been agreed on, every

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

The Way of the Church

Harpers, 1950) I, 65, reviewed by the present writer in *The Historian* XIII (Autumn 1950), 79ff. For a blunt statement and searching criticism of the common practice of prehistorians of giving full priority to the concept of evolution at the expense of the evidence, see respectively M. Jacobs, in *The American Anthropologist* 50 (1948), 565f, and W. D. Wallis, "Presuppositions in Anthropological Interpretations," *Ibid.*, pp. 560-4.

⁷⁰W. A. Irwin, in *Vetus Testamentum*, III (1953), 61. See our discussion of this in *THE IMPROVEMENT ERA* 57 (March 1954), 148ff.

⁷¹A. von Gall, *Basileia tou Theou* (Heidelberg, 1926), p. 14.

⁷²T. Schermann, *Allgem. Kirchenordnung* (II), 143.

⁷³R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 1941 (*Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über d. N. T.*, begr. v. H. A. Meyer).

⁷⁴Manilius I, pp. xli f.

⁷⁵W. Ahlwardt, *The Divans* (London, 1870), p. viii.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁷⁷Tridentinum, Can. iv, in P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, II, 82.

⁷⁸Schermann, *op. cit.*, II, 269.

⁷⁹Clementine, Epistle in *Patrol. Graec.* II, 28.

⁸⁰Tertullian, *Scorpiacae* c. 11: *Sed haec est perversitas fidei, probata non credere, non probata praesumere.*

⁸¹Athanasius, *Dubia*, in *Patrol. Graec.* XXVIII, 1377-80.

⁸²In *Patrol. Lat.* XIII, 1177.

NAVAJOLAND

by Betty Zieve

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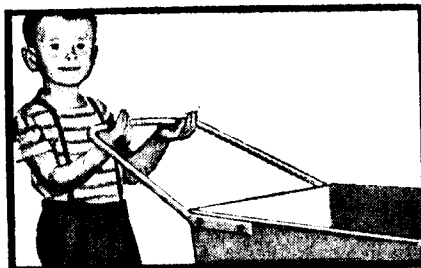
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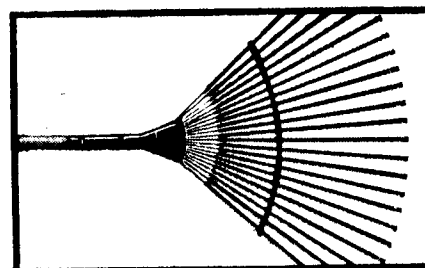
It is the place of round, earth-
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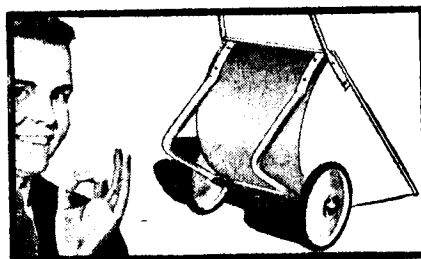
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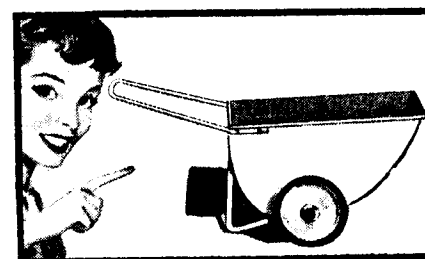
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expert is his own yardstick, to which Ezekiel must conform. This we call the rule of vanity, when the scholar simply sets himself up as the final court of appeal.

There are, it is true, worse things than vanity, which is common to all men, and it often happens that the very pomposity of a scholar clears him of any suspicion of cynicism or intent to deceive. As Scaliger teaches us in his table talk, the principal weakness of the learned lies not in their slyness or vindictiveness but in their almost childlike simplicity and gullibility where their own gifts and talents are concerned.

Professor von Gall, for example, was perfectly sincere in his conviction that the doctrine of the Messiah could not possibly have been known to the Jews before the Exile; then when he found passages in the Old Testament that made it perfectly clear that that

doctrine was known to them, he solemnly accused such non-co-operative texts of "obscuring the clear line of thought" which he was following; and in all good faith he then removed those passages from the Bible: "If we remove these," he explains, "then almost everything falls into perfect order—unless the text is corrupt." If any lingering traces of the Messianic teaching remain in the text after von Gall has got through with it, he begs us to attribute such to lurking corruptions which he has overlooked. How disarming, and how naive!⁷¹

Neither can we charge with malpractice those students of history who, having become sincerely convinced that there was no organization in the primitive church, deftly remove as a corruption of the text anything in the New Testament that might imply that there was such an organization.⁷² Quite recently Professor Bultmann,

having decided that the message of John is a purely spiritual one; is, as it were, honor bound to remove from John 3:5 those crass physical words "... and of water," which for him can only be a later interpolation.⁷³

These people are honest and consistent in their operations, and one need no more accuse them of bad faith than one would condemn the faithful guide in the woods because he is going north when he sincerely believes he is going east. But that simple vanity which forbids us to condemn such guides also admonishes and excuses us from following them.

"What stamps the last twenty years with their special character," wrote Housman at the beginning of this century, "is . . . the absence of great scholars. . . . They now pretend that the relapse of the last twenty years is not a reaction against the great work of their elders, but a supplement to it. To the Lachmanns and Bentleys and Scaligers they politely ascribe the quality of *Genialitat*: there is a complementary virtue called *Umsicht* (circumspection, perspicacity) and this they ascribe to themselves. Why, I cannot tell."⁷⁴

Lest the reader think such charges of vanity are exaggerated, we reproduce herewith a certificate of supreme competence, written by a famous scholar in recommendation of himself to establish beyond a doubt the authority by which he does the amazing things described in the certificate itself. In his preface to his edition of the *Divans* of the earliest Arabic poets, the celebrated Dr. Ahlwardt writes (with our italics):

In this edition I have chiefly relied on some manuscripts of the text . . . but I have not abstained from adopting readings which appeared to me more appropriate, from other sources. *I think myself justified in claiming this privilege as a right.* As I would not hesitate, when a verse had faults in the metre or lacks its proper feet, to correct it as far as I am able to do so from the context, so likewise I do not

(Continued on following page)



Crippling the word of power: Under the Roman emperors, the original intent of book censorship was to render ineffective the magical power of the written word to do harm to the person of the emperor. The little figure on the left, wearing the peaked cap required of all Jews in the 14th century, is pronouncing a fervid "Amen!" to a prayer in which the words asking God to avenge the blood of the Jewish martyrs have been blacked out, either by a Christian censor or the Jewish owner who wanted to save his book. (After Eisler.)

CONTROLLING THE PAST

(Continued from preceding page)

scruple to reject a reading that is not reconcilable with my appreciation of the sense, and to select another one or even to invent one.⁷⁴

Ahlwardt claims as a right the privilege of inventing a line of his own whenever the text before him offends his "appreciation of the sense." And to what remarkable personal gifts does Professor Ahlwardt attribute his infallible judgment of Arabic poetry? Not, surprisingly enough, to any superior knowledge of Arabic language or poetic idiom, but solely to the possession of a quality of superior acumen which only those trained in a modern university possess: "I readily concede," he writes, "that the feeling of the language which the native Arabian philologists possessed is in great measure wanting in us. . . . The faculty which is especially concerned in these matters, however, is one which was wholly, or almost wholly, denied to them. . . . critical acumen."⁷⁴

This is that very *Umsicht* over which Housman makes merry. One would suppose that "the faculty which is especially concerned" with the business of reconstructing ancient verses would be that "feeling of the language" by which alone poetry can be produced or comprehended. But not so. *Umsicht* is the thing, and Ahlwardt proceeds to ascribe it to himself in lavish measure: "On this ground, as I judge, we have a right to reject readings even when they have been expressly sanctioned by them. I readily admit that we neither now nor ever can equal them in quantity of knowledge. I do not rate our knowledge high, but our power, our method of investigation, our critical treatment of a given subject."⁷⁵

And why is Herr Ahlwardt so frank and open in confessing limitations of knowledge? Because he cannot conceal them: any claim to intimate knowledge of a language may be quickly and easily put to the test, whereas in matters of "power, method, and critical acumen" every scholar is his own examiner and awards himself his own certificate: "Every scholar goes his own way, and according to his private predilection chooses what is genuine and what is secondary. . . ."

Ahlwardt claims training in a wonderful method by which the initiate

can bring forth knowledge of the past; this knowledge, he says, is far inferior to that possessed by the ancients themselves but is to be preferred to theirs, since their knowledge, though superior to it, was not derived by the approved method! Incredible as it seems, this is the normal attitude of scholars to records of the past, as Paul Kahle has demonstrated at great length. In the end, the mood, the method, the ripe assurance of the individual researcher, in a word, his vanity, has priority over all evidence.

But once a text has survived the ravages of the censor and received its final, "definitive" form at the hands of editors, it still had to face new and deadly perils before being placed in the hands of the general reader. For now comes the business of interpreting, a major factor where religious documents are concerned. Without adding, removing, or altering a single letter in a document one may by simply interpreting it as it stands effectively control its message. Here is the field in which the party can bring direct influence to bear. The Council of Trent "decrees that no one, relying on his own skill, shall . . . presume to interpret the said sacred Scriptures contrary to that sense which holy mother Church—whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures—hath held and doth hold."⁷⁶ And there is no text on earth so clear, simple, and unequivocal but that some devout commentator cannot make it mean the very opposite to what it says. Thus Justin Martyr in the *Dialogue* (120) can demonstrate with ease that Genesis 22:17 is really a most terrible curse against the seed of Abraham!

There is an easy way of discovering in Mansi or the *Patrologiae* those texts which run counter to the claims of the Roman church: when the text suddenly gives way to long crowded columns of commentary, it is almost a sure sign that something has been said that has to be explained away, and the more clear and unequivocal the ancient statement, the more troublesome and extensive the commentary. Seventeen pages of Mansi are devoted to getting around the simply and clearly stated thirty-seventh canon of the Council of Arles (309) decreeing that paintings should be banned from the churches and explaining why. Schermann, in all seriousness, tells

us that the remark of Aristides, that the Primitive Christians rejoiced on the death of an infant "all the more, as for one that has left the earth in a sinless condition" proves the early Christians baptized babies!⁷⁷ Now to those reared in churches that teach and practise infant baptism the passage may prove just that, but to those reared in another tradition it seems to convey the very opposite meaning, identifying sinlessness with infancy as such, since Aristides says that though there was rejoicing at the death of any faithful member, for an infant that was something special. The point here is that what looks perfectly natural and logical to Schermann is, whether right or wrong, really the reflection of his partisan training.

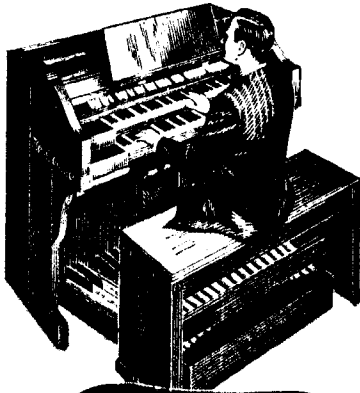
In a very early writing attributed to Peter, that Apostle is represented as complaining to James about "the varied interpretations of my words" enjoying currency in the Church: "They seem to think they can interpret my own words better than I can, pretending to report my very thoughts, when as a fact such things never entered my head. If they dare so much while I am still alive, what liberties will they not take after I am gone!"⁷⁸

The greatest handicap an ancient writer has in trying to tell his story against entrenched opinions of the scholars is that he cannot be present to defend himself. The master himself is dead, the public in ignorance, and the field is left clear to the servants of the household to make themselves magnificent at the expense of their lord; when the master does turn up unexpectedly, as did Ben Asher, he is promptly turned out-of-doors so the masquerade can continue. Already Tertullian complains of the technique of reading the scripture so that it says one thing and means another, as if it were all an allegory, parable, or enigma. "But this is to pervert the faith," he says, "not to believe plain evidence but to put in its place unfounded propositions—and then accept them."⁷⁹

Thus, the plain statement in Genesis 18, that the Lord visited Abraham and ate with him, may be explained in two ways, according to writing attributed to Athanasius: (1) If it really was the Lord, then there can have been no eating, and (2) if they really ate, then it could not

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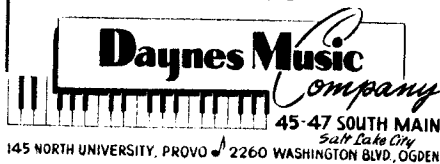


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THE LAMANITE



Street in Walpi, Arizona. A Hopi Indian unloads his burro outside the quaintly built stone and mud houses of the town.

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sied hands and teach untutored minds and comfort broken hearts.

There are too many who "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel," and too few who have judgment and faith and mercy and kindness for the unfortunate. There are too many who pray on their knees for fulfilment of prophecy and too few who let their hearts be softened and become "nursing fathers and mothers" to the down-trodden. There are too many Levites who pull their robes about them and pass by with disdain, and too few who "take them to the inn" and give them tender treatment and care.

There are too many curiosity seekers and too few laborers. We are constantly reminded of the eloquent scripture given to the Nephites:

Wherefore, a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins; neither shall ye

revile against them because of their filthiness; but ye shall remember your own filthiness. (Jacob 3:9.)

Again, there are too many who push down and tread under, and too few who lift up, encourage, and help.

There are too many goats and too few sheep. There are too many who exploit and profit by his misfortune, and there are too few who give the stranger meat and drink and clothe his nakedness and visit him in prison.

My good people: Accept the Lamanite as your brother. I ask for him, not tolerance—cold, calculating tolerance; haughty, contemptible tolerance; scornful, arrogant tolerance; pitying, coin-tossing tolerance. Give them what they want and need and deserve—opportunity and brotherliness and understanding, warm and glowing fellowship, unstinted and beautiful love, enthusiastic and affectionate brotherhood.

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have been the Lord.⁸⁰ In either case the scripture is adjusted to our ideas of what the Lord should do and under no conditions need we change our own opinions to agree with what the scripture tells us he does. Against

those scriptural passages (to cite another case) which tell us that Mary had other children besides Jesus "we give this argument," writes Pope Siricus, "she could not have, because that would be vileness and incon-

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