

run off for guidance in preparing material  
for Agalobblishili Aug 1985

A survey of the research of J.Neville Birdsall

My work in the field of textual criticism was first stimulated by lectures given for the Faculty of Divinity of Cambridge University by J.N.Sanders, then Dean of Peterhouse. On his recommendation, I read the handbook of Kirsopp Lake in its sixth edition of 1928, revised by Silva New. This book acted as a channel of revelation, opening up the world of textual study and its wonders, and my scholarship has been devoted to this area ever since. My many other intellectual interests have both contributed to this primary task, and have themselves been illuminated by it. Since my life was firstly that of a Baptist pastor, and later, for most of it, has been that of a university teacher, these pursuits have been engaged in during the intervals of teaching a wide range of topics, in Leeds, Birmingham, and Los Angeles.

I was fortunate that in the second year of my theological studies, R.P.Casey returned to Cambridge as Dean of Sidney Sussex College, and gave lectures on Textual Criticism for the Faculty. He was disposed to accept my shy approaches, and to encourage me with the hope of research under his guidance. My work as an undergraduate had been disappointing in its results, apart from two college prizes in the Biblical field, but Casey apparently took enthusiasm and desire to engage in his field as an earnest of things to come. In conjunction with G.D.Kilpatrick, and in connection with the incipient work of the I.G.N.T.P., he asked me to collate the works of Photius, identifying the New Testament quotations, and defining their text-type. I began this work while Minister of the Park St.Baptist Church, in Thaxted, Essex, in the first year of my marriage. I cannot sufficiently emphasise the effect upon my life and work, of my wife Irene, who, from the first moment of her perception of my devotion to this work, and my hopes and ambitions in connection with it, gave me, as she still gives me, every support. The same has been true of our four children in later years. To my wife's support is in part due the fact that in that year of pastoral work, although no longer in an academic setting, I both studied for and won the Jeremie Hellenistic Prize, and did sufficient work on Photius to be able to present to Trinity College an essay on work in progress in support of an application for the Stanton Studentship in Divinity, to which I was elected.

The book of Lake, in its sixth edition, speaks encouragingly of the potential interest of the Ethiopic version, on the analogy of the importance for Septuagintal studies which had been found to reside in its data. I accordingly began to learn Ethiopic from the handbook of M.Chaine. My interest in the Oriental versions of the New Testament had already been stimulated by the references to the Armenian and Georgian versions in the work of Lake, Blake and New on the "Caesarean Text". These interests were not to bear fruit for some years, but the seeds were sown in my last year of sitting tripos examinations, and nurtured through the year at Thaxted and the succeeding year, during which I enjoyed the Stanton Studentship. In that year, I continued the study of Syriac with A.E.Goodman.

The second year of the Stanton Studentship I had to forego, as a call to the pastorate of the Hertford Baptist Church came unexpectedly, to which I felt that I must make a positive response. I am still uncertain whether sub specie aeternitatis

that was the right or the wise step to take. Nevertheless, the problems with which that two year pastorate confronted me, gave me the opportunity to study more widely in philosophy and systematic theology than I had hitherto done. I also continued the work on the gospel quotations of Photius, and submitted it to H.F.D.Sparks, the editor of the Journal of Theological Studies, by whom it was accepted for publication. (The study of the quotations in the rest of the New Testament was finished during my research year at Nottingham, and published two years after the study of the gospels ). The study of Armenian and Georgian also began during those years in the pastorate, from the handbooks of Alfred Meillet, and Franz Zorrell, S.J.

The two year period of a difficult pastorate for which I was far too young, concluded with my decision that it was into the academic field that I must certainly go if the way opened. Open it did by the award of a Research Studentship at Nottingham University ( my gratification at this achievement was enhanced when two years later I was told that a like Studentship of Manchester University would have been given me, had Nottingham's date of interview been later ! ). I must again write in what may seem fulsome terms of those from whose encouragement I benefitted so greatly - Alan Richardson, Professor of Christian Theology in the University of Nottingham, Richard Hanson, supervisor of my research, Noel King, Robert Leaney, Molly Whittaker, and fellow members of the weekly seminar, devoted during that year to the Book of Revelation. They cannot have known what benefits they bestowed on one whose greatest need was acceptance and encouragement .

I had gone to Nottingham believing that I should continue the work begun on Photius, by extending it to other Byzantine writers, and seek to date the earlier geographical spread of the Byzantine text, and to define its eventual dominance . There were problems, however, in identifying texts and obtaining critical editions. My supervision was by Richard Hanson, in collaboration with G.D.Kilpatrick, who before his election as Dean Ireland's Professor at Oxford, had been Reader at Nottingham. As the expert in textual criticism, Kilpatrick advised me to turn to a subject easier of access. This was an issue raised in the recent work of Günther Zuntz on the text of the Pauline epistles, namely the relationship of the remarkable manuscript on Athos ( Gregory 1739 ), discovered and studied by Eduard von der Goltz, to several minuscules and late uncial fragments. Their long-observed common peculiarities had been given greater coherence by their evident relationship to the characteristics of the text and marginal notes revealed in the publication of the Athos manuscript. Zuntz in his lectures had made the assumption that all the manuscripts in question ( three minuscules and two uncial fragments ) were copies of the Codex von der Goltz . I began work on the Bodleian ms.Roe 16 which the Bodleian deposited in the keeping of the University of Nottingham. For the Codex von der Goltz itself, I worked at first on photostats preserved at Harvard, used by Enslin in his collation, but at a later stage the Library of Congress was able to provide a microfilm.

After only one year at Nottingham, guided by the advice and support of Alan Richardson, I was fortunate to be appointed Assistant Lecturer in Biblical Studies in

the University of Leeds, my teaching lying mainly in the field of post-exilic Old Testament and intertestamental literature, history and religious development. I was encouraged to continue my candidacy for the Nottingham Ph.D., and I owe much to Richard Hanson for his regularly summoning me each term to give account of the progress of my research. In the busy life of writing a number of different lecture courses as I went along, I needed this periodic stimulus. In a visit to Paris and Vienna in 1958, I studied at first hand the mss. Paris B.N.gr.112 ( Gregory 6) and Wien N.B. graec.theol.302 ( Gregory 424). I had already examined the fragments of Hebrews in the British Museum ( as it then was ) B.M. Harl.5613\*, and made comparison with photographs of Hamburg Stadt- und Universitäts-Bibliothek Gr.50. These two fragments had earlier been classified as fragments of one manuscript, but I was able to demonstrate that they were from two different manuscripts. This view was confirmed on the spot by T.C.Skeat, and I later (1975) had the gratification that Guglielmo Cavallo also accepted my view. I also benefitted in my first visit to the Museum from the help of Gerald Bonner, then an assistant keeper of manuscripts. This brought my work to a point where conclusions might be drawn, following especially the pattern of Lake's work on Family 1. I demonstrated that the six manuscripts are a group whose relationship must be described as two lines of descent, from a lost archetype through two independent intermediaries. 1739, the two fragments M1 and M2, and 1908 form one sub-group, while 424 and 6 form the other. Encouraged by Hanson and Kilpatrick, I successfully presented my thesis to the University of Nottingham in 1959, being examined by Hanson, and C.S.C.Williams. (There has later come to light the manuscript Venice Marc.gr.983 = Greg. 0243, containing I Cor.13.4 - end, and the whole of II Cor. This too is a member of the group with close affinity to the M fragments).

From contact with Martyn Lloyd-Jones during my Hertford ministry, I was invited during these years 1956-1960 to participate in the Tyndale New Testament conferences. From this came the invitations to give papers on the textual aspect of two topics, namely the papers on John and the Book of Revelation. The Tyndale Lecture for 1958 on " the Bodmer papyrus of John" ( i.e. p66, the only John ms. of the collection published at the time) was also the direct result of this link. Many friendships date from the meetings I attended, the most treasured being that with Professor Frederick F.Bruce, whom I came to appreciate more and more as the years passed. Through his suggestion, no doubt, I was given the opportunity to write major articles on the Text, the Canon and the Language of the New Testament for the New Bible Dictionary published in 1962.

By the end of 1960, when I left my first academic appointment at Leeds, I had gained acquaintance with both papyrus and minuscule parchment mss. of the New Testament in Greek, had learned several of the languages proper to the study of the transmission of that text, and had been given the opportunity to write surveys in several areas. While the latter activity is not one through which much wealth or fame is to be gained, it is one of the best ways of deepening one's knowledge of a given area, and I have never regretted the chances to do this to which my bibliography bears witness. The study of the Bodmer papyrus stimulated my thinking on methods of establishing and defining relationships of witnesses to the text, and I broke new ground in my observation that the previously current

categories were no longer appropriate, and that we must devise new, beginning from the earliest attestation. This idea sprang, as I now perceive, from the influence of the work of Zuntz, one of the enduring sources of my methods and thinking.

I was also approached in 1960 to revise the Handbook of Textual Criticism of F.G. Kenyon. In making an agreement, I modified this to writing a handbook of my own, as I perceived that an old and classic work required far too great a revision. In my earliest years at Birmingham, I did much work on this, but the work never came to fruition except in a few articles, since I discovered that almost every item demanded new research. Some studies of manuscripts, and more precise identifications are the product of this period. In retrospect, I have no regret that this project was aborted, as it is only at the end of my career that I should feel competent to treat the whole area, and even then, would require a back-up team. To have attempted the work, however, was like the writing of dictionary articles, a necessary broadening of knowledge within the chosen field.

The move to Birmingham proved to be important in many ways. Gordon Davies demanded a high level of devotion to teaching, for which I am grateful, but also encouraged research, without in any way attempting to prescribe what that should be. The Selly Oak Colleges Library, and the Library of Woodbrooke College, were an added resource, and gave opportunity for deeper acquaintance with books, many from the library of Rendel Harris, and with manuscripts, both Greek and Syriac. In the earliest period at Birmingham, I was led into two other areas which enriched me, and established broader horizons to my field of vision. These were hagiographical studies, and application to the Georgian language. The other major benefits of membership of that university were my acquaintance with George Thomson, and the transformation of my knowledge of Greek thereby, and my participation in the development of Byzantine studies which Thomson, Waterhouse and others were promoting. In later years, I taught Greek to a number of aspirant Byzantinists, gave a course in Greek palaeography primarily for such students, and supervised or examined a number of doctoral or magistral theses.

Hagiography was a closed book to one raised in English nonconformity. I came upon it in attempting to follow the method by which Rendel Harris, one of my models, had identified the locality from which a manuscript family had originated, namely the Ferrar group. The presence of unique saints' commemorations in the menology with which some members of that group are furnished, had led to the certainty ( which palaeography later confirmed ) that Calabria was the home of all but one of those members. Amongst the members of the group of which 1739 is the chief witness, is 424, in which a detailed menology is found. I began to transcribe this and to try to discover some similar certainty to that of Harris in respect of its provenance. This took me to the works of the Bollandists, at that time not possessed by the University, but fortunately by the Roman Catholic seminary of St. Mary's College, Oscott. There I was made very welcome, and from there was also able to introduce two splendid teachers of scripture as successive recognized lecturers in my department. I never succeeded in my original purpose, the provenance of 424 remaining obscure until now, but my work was welcomed as a publication under the benign aegis of Fr. François Halkin, S.J. I paid several



memorable visits to the Library of the Bollandists in Brussels. Other valued scholarly and oecumenical friendships sprang from that experience. I also ventured a little catalogue of the hagiographical manuscripts of the Selly Oak Colleges Library, which also appeared in the *Analecta*. My catalogue of the Greek Mss. in Birmingham, indirectly stimulated by that publication, is not yet published, but a few months' work would suffice to make it Druckfertig. All these ventures widened my bibliography and especially my knowledge of various tools important for manuscript studies and for the background of Biblical manuscripts in Eastern Christianity.

I had learned Georgian from Zorell's *Grammatik zur altgeorgischen Bibeluebersetzung* during my Hertford years. When I was working on the text of Revelation, I obtained through the help of David Lang and Niko Kiasashvili a microfilm of one of the manuscripts in which its Georgian translation is to be found. The survey of Michel Tarkhnishvili had told me that the version was unpublished, and I entertained the illusion that I could produce such a publication. But I found that I could not read the script, or make out the grammar of what lay before me there. The matter lay quiescent. Then I was visited by my friend Robert Thomson, Casey's only other doctoral pupil in his Cambridge period. He had been very kind and generous, as Casey's executor and residuary legatee upon Casey's premature death, giving me in fact a considerable part of Casey's books. Later, we had collaborated in a *Denkschrift* in Casey's memory. At the time of his visit, with his wife, to our home in Birmingham, he had the opportunity to study at Louvain, prior to taking up a post in Armenian at Harvard. Although no such opportunity could be mine, I decided to seek what help I could get from David Lang. Through his representations, the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University made available to me a weekly class, without fee. From 1962 to 1964, I was able to read Georgian with Lang on this basis, and during this time a very remarkable piece of good fortune befell me.

At that time, Molly Whittaker of the University of Nottingham was engaged upon an edition of the work of Melito of Sardis. The only full extant work is the Peri tou Pascha, first come to light in the Chester Beatty collection, and at that time, more recently, amongst the papyri of the Bodmer collection. This had coincided with various discoveries and identifications in the field of translations of Greek patristica into the languages of Christian antiquity. The master of Greek manuscript lore, and patristics, Marcel Richard, had lighted upon an incipit, given with French translation, in the catalogue of the Georgian manuscripts in the Iveron monastery of Mount Athos compiled by R.P. Blake. He accordingly made a photograph, which he transmitted to Miss Whittaker. She conveyed it to Lang, who, being ignorant of Greek, suggested that we study this as our reading at our weekly meeting. So, with greater practice in reading Georgian now behind me, I was flung, or flung myself, into mastering the minuscule form of the so-called xutcuri and deciphering the text. It proved to be indeed Melito's work, with some variant readings in the very first sentence. During Lang's year as Visiting Professor of Caucasian Languages at U.C.L.A., I continued the work by myself, as well as studying Armenian more closely with C.J.F. Dowsett.

At Lang's suggestion, I was invited to follow him as a visiting scholar at the same institution in the academic year 1965-1966, with the title of Visiting Associate Professor of Caucasian Languages. During this time, I finished the work on Melito in Georgian, and submitted it for publication to *Le Muséon*. Teaching opportunities extended my knowledge of Georgian literature and history. I also began work which was intended to be preparatory to the publication of my doctoral thesis. This was a synoptic collation of the manuscripts with which the study had been concerned, based on a recollection of all the manuscripts. Opportunities also presented themselves to study manuscript collections in the Edward Laurence Doheny Memorial Library, at St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, and at the Huntington Library, San Marino.

On my return to Birmingham in 1966, I concentrated to a large extent upon Georgian. In 1968, another remarkable experience of serendipity occurred. The University had recently instituted the civilized practice of study leave, which was given as one term in nine. I thus had the summer of 1968 to spend in this way, and planned a study tour of various European centres, visiting scholars and inspecting manuscripts in the various areas and languages of interest to me. The term of the journey was to be Vienna, for I still entertained hopes of publishing my thesis, with the additional material which I had gathered in the year in California. I noted that a small collection of Georgian manuscripts had been described in 1940 as present in the Austrian National Library. I determined to investigate whether these were still to be found. They were produced, and I discovered that, as Grigol Peradze, the former investigator, had observed, one was a very important palimpsest. His intimations were a helpful guide, but the total discovery far exceeded what he had led me to anticipate. The manuscript was made up of fragments of no less than sixteen older manuscripts, about half of which were written in the oldest form of Georgian of which we know, with the so-called xanmeti morphology of verb and adjective.

I proceeded to analyze the manuscript by means of photographs, and published a xanmeti version of the Protevangelium of James, in a version distinct in text from a Sinai text earlier published by Garitte. This was followed by a short extract from a version of I Esdras, again distinct in text from later versions known in full. Lastly, fragments of the Synoptic gospels were identified. These were all in the early xanmeti form. Other texts in the same form were transcribed, both Biblical and hagiographical. Other texts, not xanmeti, were identified. A fragment ostensibly from a version of Epiphanius, On weights and measures, has been published by van Esbroeck following my transcription. A full report on the manuscript was last given in 1974. Some other Georgian materials from elsewhere were also studied and published, amongst them Hexaplaric marginalia, and an analysis of the harmonized form of the summary of the gospel accounts in an early martyrdom.

I had a long time interest in the problems of the Diatessaron stimulated by my early reading of the survey by A.F.J. Klijn of "The Western Text of the Gospels and Acts", and by the work of Arthur Vööbus. Following a suggestion made by me in the business meeting of S.N.T.S. that those who shared such an interest might become an informal Diatessaron Club (on the analogy of the Bezan Club of

Rendel Harris ), the proposal was made at a later meeting in my absence that this be realized in the context of the Society by an invitation to me to be chairman of a Seminar at the annual meeting with the Diatessaron as our subject. This was put into effect, and I functioned in that capacity from 1970 to 1981. Some items on the Diatessaron antedate the invitation, others were written to provide discussion for the Seminar. Two of them combine this interest with my Georgian studies.

A gap then appears for some years in the bibliography, apart from such articles and a few short notes. This came about through my agreement to serve as the Executive Editor of the critical apparatus of the gospel of Luke, on which the committees of the International Greek New Testament Project had been at work for many years. I had been asked to join the British committee in 1968, and when in about 1970 the American committee intimated that its work on the Greek materials was complete, I was asked to take on the task of combining this with versional materials for which the British Committee had been responsible. Believing myself to be equipped for such work by my knowledge of Greek and Christian Oriental manuscripts, and by work on scriptural quotations, I agreed. The University of Birmingham released me for three years for secondment to this work, while the British Academy took responsibility for salary, superannuation and insurance. Whether the estimate that three years were needed to complete the work would in optimal circumstances have been correct will never be known. With hindsight, I doubt it. It was, I believe, one of a series of hopelessly optimistic estimates which, combined with other factors, proved a fatal weakness within the whole enterprise, and contributed to the blemishes of the edition. It would not be in point, in this essay, to analyze these. To intimate the effect upon my scholarly output and my career, it is enough to say that neither of the two committees was in fact ready to go to press, nor was their work in even a penultimate state. What had been done proved to be full of blemishes, ranging from sheer errors of collation, in spite of threefold checks, to grave misinterpretations, especially of the import of many patristic quotations. This was largely from the work of the American committee. What had not been done, in spite of years of discussion, included almost all the versions. This should have been the work of the British committee. In the case of some versions which had been collated, there were discrepancies of method, and a number of inadequate treatments. Instead of a task of coordination, I found myself with the tasks of criticism of work submitted or of the absence of necessary work, and with attempted renewal of planning, in a large number of instances doing the basic work myself or finding helpers.

The American committee, after initial incredulity and astonishment, was, on the whole, sympathetic and supportive, but not in a position to give any practical help. Occasionally, someone's pride was hurt, but to their credit there was little of this kind of problem. The British committee, on the other hand, was almost without exception unhelpful, in different degrees and in different ways. Members were not only incredulous, but not infrequently obstructive, and one member resigned when I had to point out that his work on a version needed revision. Again, analysis would be irrelevant : their problem might be summarized by saying that they never faced up to the gravity of the situation, in all probability because they were largely responsible for it. I was not responsible for the lost twenty years, having joined the

committee recently, and having undertaken the work in good faith, but I came under pressure and criticism until I reached the point of illness. My wife and children were so concerned that they feared that I should die if I continued the task. I resigned from the editorship in 1977. This was not after the three years of secondment, which had sufficed only to uncover the main disaster areas. It was after eight years in total. Five of these were after my return to my post. During those years, I continued the work of Executive Editor, but was required by an unsympathetic departmental head, unwilling to give any relief, to fulfil all my teaching and administrative duties. On my resignation, I left ready for press chapters 1 - 5, and ( as my recollection has it ) chapter 6 also. These limits were determined by the policy ( afterwards, apparently, abandoned ) to publish in fascicules. The crowning "glory" of this whole experience was that, after I resigned, I heard through my departmental head, as a report which he apparently accepted, that the view was that I had let the British Academy down. I have never had any intimation of regret or understanding from either committee or from any member of them. The fact that my successor was permitted to produce work in which all the blemishes remained, compounded by proof reading errors of staggering proportions, suggests to me that neither he nor they ever did understand that anything was wrong. The whole matter leaves me so astonished that shame, regret and anger seem pointless responses. The practical effect was that, at the age of fifty, I was left feeling like a generation devastated in total war, needing to rebuild all over again after a catastrophe for which I bore no responsibility.

It took me a very long time to recover in health and stamina, and even longer in spirits. I have, however, been able at last to renew the effort of my own research. I have worked again in the general field of New Testament text. In the Georgian field, I have given analyses of the whole New Testament textual material as it has become available. S.N.T.S. honoured me in 1982 by the invitation to deliver a main paper in plenary session, which I devoted to " Georgian Studies and the New Testament ". This was received enthusiastically. Its published form gives the results of publication and research up to that time in the form of conclusions, with illustrative examples only. My other papers expand the evidence for particular areas, but no full publication of collations has been made. This is partly due to the loss of time in the editorial years, partly due to the conditions of British universities where secretarial assistance for anyone except departmental heads was very rare. Nevertheless, the award at length in October 1983 of a Personal Chair in the University of Birmingham helped the recovery of my morale from the trauma of the Project years. I was given the title of Professor of New Testament Studies and Textual Criticism, and delivered my inaugural lecture on May 10, 1984. Since such a promotion was necessarily inaugurated by my departmental head, I think that it may be presumed that in the interim he had perceived the injustice of the slur upon my work by members of the Academy, which he had at first accepted. After my early retirement from the teaching staff of the University in 1986, I was given the status of Professor Emeritus, with the same accompanying title.

I am particularly happy that, more recently in the early '90s, I have been able to write a definitive account of the development of the field over the past one hundred years, and that in two different presentations, I have covered the field of



the Georgian version of the New Testament, intimating its place and importance for text-critical study. In detailed discussions of individual passages or readings, I have also been able to turn to the treatment of minutiae, which in my own view is a strength of my work. A great deal remains to be done, whether in publishing such materials as the texts of the Vienna palimpsest or discussions given as lectures on various occasions. I am also fortunate that new ideas and interests still arise in my mind. I trust that there may be a providential provision of time and health to enable me to leave in published form what at present often lies in folders, requiring reinterpretation after a lapse of years.

The main foci, then, of my research have been ( 1 ) manuscript study, in which I have worked on Greek, Syriac and Georgian texts, biblical and other, in editorial, codicological and palaeographical perspective ; ( 2 ) study of the history of New Testament versions, especially Georgian, in all aspects, namely linguistic, textual and exegetical ; ( 3 ) study of patristic and later quotations of the New Testament in their bearing on the history of the text, both in Greek and in versions ; ( 4 ) the Diatessaron and the peculiar problems of its research ; ( 5 ) problems of interpretative criteria, in relation to the history of the text, and to the establishment of the original text ; ( 6 ) the history of research, and of the development of theory.

The coherence of my work may be seen by perusal of my three essays in the New Bible Dictionary, the Cambridge History of the Bible Part 1, and the 26th volume of *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*. My articles in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, the forthcoming Metzger eightieth birthday Festschrift, and the first volume of *The Indigenous Languages of the Caucasus* similarly summarize my work in the Georgian field. My other work is both contributory to what is written in those essays, and illustrative of what lies behind them.

I have seen my work within two areas of intellectual endeavour. It is both a work of philology, linked to Classical, Byzantine and Oriental studies ; and a part of Christian theology. These areas overlap, making the studies which my work exemplifies an important point at which the Christian scholar encounters fellow-workers whatever their confession, and both benefits from their contribution and correspondingly contributes to the advance of their work. It is then part of the Christian experience of participation in and witness to the life of the world.