

3 History as Christian Forgery

As far back as 1700, discerning Germans—whose nation had invented the printing press—began to say, "er lügt wie gedruckt" (he lies as though it were printed). What they especially had in mind were people who through the newspapers were massaging the truth. All over the world such skepticism, far from abating, now encompasses all the popular media. Above all, the word of rulers and politicians is suspect.

Not so well known is that those who seriously research the events and ideas of former generations have had the same problem and been compelled to extend this attitude back into the past. According to Barbara Tuchman "any historian with even the most elementary training knows enough to approach his source on the watch for concealment, distortion, or the outright lie."¹ And in 1944 Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, a British military writer both respected and controversial, was even more pointed: "Nothing can deceive like a document." It lies as though it were printed! His starting point was not only the memoirs but the official archives of World War I. He found that generals and others in high office edited the past with a view to how the future would regard them. Documents were altered retrospectively, destroyed, or even replaced with outright forgeries.²

Such distortions have a long, dishonorable history. They first appear in ancient writings about generals, kings, and emperors, of which the following two examples can be instructive.

Ramses II (1279-1213 BC) of the nineteenth dynasty during Egypt's New Kingdom is often called Ramses the Great, as he also wished to portray himself by erecting hundreds of huge, megalomaniac monuments throughout Egypt and Nubia. He loved to brag about his achievements "with grandiose scenes of his victories." He fought against the Hittites for seventeen years. Their greatest battle was at Kadesh on the Orontes in 1299 BC, which Ramses also celebrated as a great victory.³ But this is an unsubtle lie engraved in stone. The battle of Kadesh against King Muwatallis was no better than a draw. Ramses could not defeat the Hittites, who fought him to a standstill. "The actual result was a truce between the two nations."⁴

Half a millennium later, King Sennacherib (705—681 BC) came to occupy the center stage of Middle Eastern history. After a tempo-

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rary weakening of Assyria, he rebuilt Nineveh and made it his capital. He became a mighty and seemingly irresistible monarch, crushing many rebellions against his empire. On a clay prism that

archaeologists have recovered he tells how his campaign against Judah and its neighbors was a total success. He mentions capturing no fewer than forty-five of its fortified cities as well as laying siege to its capital. About this, he boastfully states that he made Hezekiah "a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage." This is all corroborated by the parallel biblical records. Sennacherib omits to state, however, his failure to capture the city;⁵ he was compelled to leave without accomplishing this design. Instead, he had to content himself by accepting "a heavy indemnity (c.f. II Kings 18-19),"⁶ But this was most uncharacteristic. Why would a predatory Assyrian king accept a part of the city's treasure if he could have had all of it? Actually he was driven off by a lethal pestilence that the Bible mentions (2 Kings 19:35-36) but which he passes over in silence.

C.W. Ceram, surveying all the campaigns of this megalomaniac emperor, declares: "His chronicling of these deeds is exaggerated, and freely invented in point of numbers. Indeed, the records of Sennacherib bring to mind the typically modern picture of a dictator shouting vast lies at vast audiences, civilian or military, confident in the knowledge that they will be swallowed whole."⁷ That is, until twenty-six hundred years later archaeologists patiently dug up and reconstructed the truth.

Then there is the *Aeneid*, Virgil's magnificent cock-and-bull story about the origins of the Romans, who he said were descended from the Trojans. Aeneas, his hero, was even the son of Venus, a goddess! Well, the ancestors of the people who settled in Latium, where Rome developed on its seven mountains by the Tiber, possibly were immigrants, but from the Balkans⁸—not from north-eastern Asia Minor near the Hellespont, where Troy used to stand so many centuries before. Just a little thinking suffices to disprove this myth. Apart from the bit about the Roman gods, we only need to reflect on a single, crucial fact: the people of Troy and its surroundings would have spoken Mycenaean Greek, not Latin, as the Romans did.

The *Aeneid* is marvelous poetry and a splendid literary fiction, one of the best in the world; but it also grossly distorts the history of the Romans, whose most significant antecedents were much more local: the Etruscans and their contemporaries, the Greeks. The latter had settled on or just off the Italian peninsula a few centuries before. In this matter, Virgil's great epic is downright political propaganda, singing the praises of Augustus, the first emperor, a sly dictator (really just an upstart, Julius Caesar's adoptive son), for

whom the poet was helping to invent an illustrious past. For this, as well as his other works, he was well rewarded in suitably material ways.

Owing to the example and prestige of Virgil's *Aeneid*, this myth sent down many echoes through the centuries. In the Middle Ages and beyond, it enabled other European peoples also to lie to themselves about their origins, warping the Western European mind by stuffing it with stories about illustrious forebears.

"For some thousand years there persisted a literary—even a patriotic—tradition that the dispersed heroes of Troy had founded certain Western nations, notably the British and the French. In about the middle of the 7th century a Frankish chronologer, Fredegarius, related how a party of the Trojans, after the destruction of their city, settled between the Rhine, the Danube, and the sea, under their king, Francio. This is the first known reference to the Trojan origin of the Franks, but a long succession of chroniclers, genealogists, and panegyrists echoed it. The myth was still persistent enough in the 16th century to inspire . . . Ronsard's national epic *La Franciade* (1572)"⁹

Across the English Channel, "in Britain a similar tradition had been early formulated (before the 9th century) that Brutus, the great-grandson of the hero Aeneas, legendary founder of the Romans, was the founder of the British people. . . . This tradition was followed by Wace of Jersey in his *Roman de Brut* (1155), and it persisted until the time of Shakespeare."¹⁰ According to this myth, the British are a species of Romans!

More striking still was a masterpiece in Portuguese, *Os Lusíadas*, 1572 ("The Lusiads") by Luís de Camões. This is "the greatest of all Renaissance epics after the pattern of the Roman poet Virgil."¹¹ The name of the book means "the sons of Lusus, companions of Bacchus and mythical first settlers in Portugal."¹² So the people of that country supposedly also had no ordinary ancestors!

Historically, of course, those tales about European nations somehow being Romans and descendants of fugitives from Asia Minor or thereabouts are nonsense, pure and simple, as was their prototype, which Virgil wrote. So why should we trouble the reader with it? It so happens that his fabrication has a bearing on the understanding of prophecy as it relates to the Romans themselves. What the Bible predicted about them can only be properly understood in the light of their real history as they interrelated with and were profoundly shaped by other people living in Italy and Sicily before the Christian era, especially the Greeks.

Unfortunately it is not only pagans and unbelievers that have tampered with truth, adjusting the historical record to flatter them

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or suit their purposes. Many who profess to serve the Lord, especially clerics, have also done so, on numerous occasions. Liddell Hart takes a very jaundiced view of them: "I have found in dealing with men of fine character that if they are devout and orthodox Christians one cannot depend on their word as well as if they are not. The good man who is a good churchman is apt to subordinate truth to what he thinks will prove good."¹³

This, we think, is too harsh—though it is a sad testimony to the impression that Christians sometimes make on unbelievers. It also overlooks the role of other religions and ideologies, in fact every paradigm by which people live, including agnosticism and atheism. Yet it is true that men of the cloth have often distorted facts or badly misinterpreted them, and therefore much of church history is suspect.

Most notorious has been a forgery known as the Donation of Constantine, which the papacy used for seven centuries to validate its claims to Western European dominion in both church and state. Christians who doubted its authenticity were burned at the stake, for instance at Strasbourg in 1478, and yet Renaissance scholars convincingly exposed its falsity, which Catholicism today acknowledges.

To it were added the False Decretals, otherwise known as the Decretals of Pseudo-Isidore. This ninth-century collection of Catholic ecclesiastical laws seems to have originated somewhere in France.¹⁴ Purporting to contain "the decrees of councils and decretals of popes (written replies on questions of ecclesiastical discipline) of the first seven centuries," it also cleverly blended genuine material with blatant forgeries. It included the Donation.

All this fraud was to bolster the power of the medieval church and protect it from governmental interference. First brought to light at the Council of Soissons in 853, "the False Decretals was also used extensively during the reform of Pope Gregory VII in the 11th century." It was only in the seventeenth century that David Blondel, a Protestant theologian, convincingly refuted these documents.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this material entered into the foundation on which medieval papal power was erected and the effects have never been eliminated from the Catholic mind.

More of this will be said in our final chapter.

Of course, not all people are deliberate liars or prone to drastic distortions. An eminent exception, mentioned by Sir Alec Guinness, was the famous French humanist Michel de Montaigne (1533-92), a man "who could always see the two sides of a coin."¹⁶ Another, in the early Christian period, was Augustine of Hippo. He clashed with Jerome, an almost equally venerated Catholic worthy, for attempting to explain away the Apostle Peter's denial of the gospel at Antioch

through his cowardly anti-Gentile behavior, as well as the fact that Paul reprimanded him in public.

The record of this episode obviously undermined the idea of Peter's being pope, elevated above all criticism by his apostolic colleagues, and therefore infallible. So Jerome suggested that the two men were play-acting. He said "'Peter's feigned observance of Jewish law (which was offensive to gentile believers) was countered by Paul's feigned rebuke, so that both camps would be kept safe—those favoring circumcision would follow Peter, and those resisting it would praise the liberty preached by Paul.' This is what Jerome calls 'profitable dissemblance' (*utilis simulatio*), by which 'one dissembles for a time, in order to work out one's own and others' salvation.'"¹⁷ What an interesting euphemism for lying!

But Augustine, "though he recognized a special office in the Pope, was not surprised by the notion that Popes could err, just as Peter had at Antioch."¹⁸ That is, he did not believe in papal infallibility. And he hated lying, which boded ill for this relationship with his fellow Catholic, who could be most unpleasant toward people he disliked. As Wills expresses it, "Augustine did not know, when he first addressed Jerome in his distant Bethlehem monastery, that he was seeking the truth from one of history's great liars. Jerome's biographer, J.N.D. Kelly, has shown how his subject lied whenever it served his purpose to do so."¹⁹

Much more harmful, however, than Jerome's small-time twisting of truth had been the large-scale falsification perpetrated by Eusebius (AD 265-340), the church historian.

He was born in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Palestine, where he also studied at the institute created by Origen after leaving Alexandria. This was "the most famous centre of Christian philosophy."²⁰ Here Eusebius studied under Pamphilus, the "most learned" pupil and successor of Origen.²¹ He imbibed an "intense admiration" for the Alexandrian founder of that school, wrote voluminously, and collaborated with Pamphilus in writing a defense of their Master.²²

Eusebius' greatest work is his *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Its ten books cover the period "from the birth of Christ down to 323, the date of the victory of Constantine over Licinius being taken as the end of the period of persecution."²³ It became, for the medieval period,²⁴ the basic document for histories about early Christianity and kept on influencing all subsequent writers.²⁵ Even in our day, most Westerners still think of the original church as it was depicted by that ancient bishop and his successors.

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Owing to his pivotal role for so many centuries after him, we would therefore have liked to see in Eusebius the qualities that mark

the best historians, who combine—as George M. Trevelyan expresses it—a "knowledge of the evidence with 'the largest intellect, the warmest human sympathy and the highest imaginative powers.'"²⁶

Unfortunately the goal that Eusebius set himself was not to give a balanced account of ancient Christianity as a whole. His history is both incomplete and very partial to the imperial church co-founded by Constantine and the bishops of the fourth century. It has also been strongly colored by the author's personal attitude toward that emperor. Gibbon noticed this bias over two hundred years ago:

"The gravest of the ecclesiastical historians, Eusebius himself, indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace, of religion. Such an acknowledgment will naturally excite a suspicion that a writer who has so openly violated one of the fundamental laws of history has not paid a very strict regard to the observance of the other; and the suspicion will derive additional credit from the character of Eusebius, which was less tinctured with credulity, and practised in the arts of court, than that of almost any of his contemporaries."²⁷

This is especially noticeable in his *Praise of Constantine*. According to Michael Grant, the historian-bishop falsified the emperor into "a mere sanctimonious devotee." His version of the man's character and events is often erroneous, contradictory, or factually untrue, with "dishonest suppressions."²⁸ Andrew Louth characterizes such productions as "works of flattery."²⁹

Paul Johnson demurs a little by saying that "Eusebius was in many ways a conscientious historian, and he had access to multitudes of sources which have since disappeared." Nevertheless, he had to admit that the *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* was "a reconstruction for ideological purposes." Eusebius really represented only "the wing of the Church which had captured the main centres of power and established a firm tradition of monarchical bishops, and had recently allied itself with the Roman state." Moreover, he sought to show retrospectively that in organization and faith this is what mainstream Christianity had always been about.³⁰ Above all, he focused on Constantine's new Hellenic state with its capital on the Bosphorus. In matters of religion, Eusebius seems to have been the emperor's chief adviser, and at the Council of Nicaea even sat on his right hand.³¹

But entire and prolific branches of Christianity lay outside or on the periphery of the Roman Empire. These the episcopal historio-grapher largely ignored, so that huge communities of believers in Britain, Ireland, Ethiopia, Syria, Georgia, Armenia, Mesopotamia,

India, and Central Asia, received scant or no coverage in his writings.

Louis Nizer, a celebrated American courtroom lawyer, once pointed out that "the truth is necessarily the reconstruction of the past." This, however, results only from responsible "factual resurrection,"³² at the hands of someone equipped with the necessary forensic skills and a passion for truth. But through strategic omissions, slanting, and improper emphasis it is easily possible to lie with facts. What results from such a reconstruction, or rather misconstruction, of the past is not truth but falsehood.

Another problem with Eusebius is that at times he intermingles history with pagan mythology. According to Jean Seznec, he explains in his *Ecclesiastical History* that the Babylonian god Baal was in reality the first king of the Assyrians, and that he lived at the time of the war between the Giants and the Titans (PG, XIX 132-133). In this he was probably influenced by Clement of Alexandria, who had from the pagan writer Euhemerus accepted the idea that originally the gods were simply deified human beings. It was at any rate Eusebius "who bequeathed to the Middle Ages, through St. Jerome, the proto-type of those crude historical synchronizations which grouped all the events and characters of human history, from the birth of Abraham down to the Christian era (including the gods themselves), into a few essential periods."³³

The religion to which Eusebius belonged was not the same thing as the Christianity of Jesus or the apostles, but in some ways a brand-new structure, resulting from its accommodation with the empire. An indication of this is the fact that a Roman bishop's area of control is still known as a diocese; this was one of the imperial subdivisions introduced by the pagan emperor Diocletian, who preceded Constantine. In many ways the church became "a mirror-image . . . the Doppelgänger of the empire."³⁴

Eusebius has been guilty of a double misrepresentation. Not only did doctrinal deviations put a great distance between what the imperial church believed and what Jesus had taught, but statecraft corrupted Christianity. Writing to Peter Carr on 10 August, 1787, Thomas Jefferson, that clear-headed student of the past and Gibbon's contemporary, puts it in a nutshell: "But a short time elapsed after the death of the great reformer of the Jewish religion, before his principles were departed from by those who professed to be his special servants, and perverted into an engine for enslaving mankind, and aggrandizing their oppressors in Church and State."³⁵ This is a concept Jefferson kept close to his heart.

The scope of Eusebius' history was also unacceptably limited. "He knew next to nothing about the Western Church,"³⁶ according to

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the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. And Andrew Louth says he also knew "next to nothing about Syriac Christianity."³⁷

If so, in the latter case the ignorance was of his own choosing. He was probably born in Palestine or Syria and, according to Froom, "knew Syriac as well as Greek, and was liberally educated in Antioch and Caesarea."³⁸ A scholarly fourth-century bishop from that area could hardly have been unacquainted with what so many people in his general area believed. The silence of Eusebius was deliberate. The reason for this is that Syrian and Mesopotamian Christianity represented a stark alternative to the imperial religion that he supported; for in his day it was not a small, obscure community, but a large and flourishing branch of the church.

Amazingly, even today, a truly large number of westerners still know virtually nothing about those Christians in Asia. Once, when I referred to the Church of the East in a telephone conversation with a respected Protestant theologian, whom it is unnecessary to name, he confessed that he was totally ignorant of its very existence. Such is the fruitage of Eusebius' *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*.

This omission constitutes a major defect of that work, for anciently the Syrian and Mesopotamian church played a pivotal role in extending God's kingdom and for a long time upholding His law together with other truths neglected in the West.

Eusebius' problem was not an inability to read what the Semitic Christians of Western Asia had written; he was simply allergic to Syrian theology. In his eyes, its major deficiency was no doubt that it accepted the Bible's teaching in a straightforward, mostly literal sense, while he preferred the fanciful allegorizing method derived from Origen and his predecessors.

The Syrians opposed this and other Alexandrian tendencies from their school at Antioch, under Lucian (c. AD 250-312), a great theologian. According to Benjamin G. Wilkinson, he was also the real editor of the New Testament, adopted by the Greek Church and eventually used by Tyndale and his successors to produce the Authorized Version of the Bible.³⁹ Lucian died just a year before Eusebius began to write his magnum opus.

Because of their theology, he excluded the Syrians from his *History*, which was produced in the following way: "Eusebius' method was to collect his authorities, go through them carefully, select such passages as suited his general plan, and then by means of copious quotations combine them into one narrative. His own contribution is often quite small . . ." ⁴⁰ To include the believers of western Asia would not have been in harmony with either his method or his mindset.

Contrary to what we may be led to assume from Eusebius, Christianity did not originate as a highly organized hierarchical body, nor was it united in every respect.

Quite soon after Christ's ascension, internal differences arose, with clashes over doctrine and practice. For instance, the apostle Paul experienced many problems with an influential Judaizing faction, which opposed and troubled him throughout his career. As already mentioned, on one occasion he even had to reprimand his colleague, the all too fallible Peter (allegedly "the first pope"), for compromising with these people (Gal. 2:11-14).

Paul's arrest in the temple precincts, near the end of his ministry, also resulted from this Judaizing strain. He had gone to that dangerous place because the church leaders at Jerusalem wanted him to take part in a very Jewish purification ritual (Acts 21:20-27). Compromising with Judaism seems to have been a weakness of many Palestinian believers, including some apostles, until the Romans destroyed the temple in AD 70.

Johnson explains the early diversity of Christianity rather strongly. He says it "began in confusion, controversy and schism and so it continued. A dominant Orthodox Church, with a recognizable ecclesiastical structure, emerged only very gradually."⁴¹

In some ways, early Christianity soon resembled nothing so much as the contending sects of modern Protestantism, although the issues dividing the early believers arose from other circumstances. This, though perhaps startling to some, is not surprising; for when people insist on deciding and thinking for themselves, they often differ.

By the fourth century, European Christianity had divided into several branches. In the Balkans and the Levant, the Orthodox Church—with imperial assistance—held power, though this was far from absolute. In the West, to a large extent, Catholicism prevailed, though not everywhere. The Celtic believers in the British Isles were holding up a shining torch of truth at variance with what Rome maintained, and so was a remnant around and in the Alps of what today are northwestern Italy and eastern France.

Absolute ecclesiastical unity can only come through compulsion. But even the mighty Roman Empire under Constantine and his successors could obviously not apply it to territories that it was unable firmly to control.

Down through the centuries and to the present day, many question marks have been placed behind Eusebius' name. For all that he supported the emperor, his very orthodoxy seems to have been suspect. At first, he was inclined to sympathy for the great heresy of his time, although he "did not wholeheartedly support either Arius or Alexander" and was even "provisionally excommunicated" during a

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strongly anti-Arian synod held at Antioch in about January 325. At Nicaea, however, he explained himself and toed the dogmatic line as required of him. Years later, "the seventh ecumenical council (787)," held at the same place, "condemned him, finding him double-minded and unstable in all his ways."⁴²

Nevertheless, for many, "his ecclesiastical history is the chief primary source for the history of the church up to 324."⁴³ On what shaky foundations some people have been erecting their edifice of so-called truth! Fortunately we are no longer limited to what Eusebius wrote.

In subsequent ages, too, the history of the Christian church has been falsified. The destruction of records is an especially favorite stratagem employed by the enemies of truth, as we have already noted in relation to the Germanic Church.

According to Henri Pirenne, the great Belgian scholar: "Ulfila [who translated the Bible into Gothic] had no successor. We have not a single text or charter in the Germanic language. The liturgy in the Churches was sung or recited in the Germanic tongue, yet no trace of it remains."⁴⁴ There would obviously also have been other theological works in Gothic. What happened to them? They were all deliberately destroyed, so that we have to depend on the writings of their enemies to establish what they believed.

According to their slanderers, they were "Arians," which—as our previous book has shown—they were not. Elsewhere, also according to Pirenne, "By the end of the 6th century Arianism had everywhere disappeared."⁴⁵ Yes, but why and how? The Germanic Church, still accused of Arianism, was forcibly exterminated, through warfare. Its real sin was its refusal to submit to the pope. Therefore, as foretold in Dan. 7, it was uprooted.

Nobody fully knows the history of that dark time and the subsequent Middle Ages. It has been systematically edited by the Adversary of all truth, in working through his human—and ecclesiastical—agents. This enemy can, moreover, after every hundred years or so, also rely on death and the sheer accumulation of events to blur the memory of the world; and then he recycles his lies. But constantly the Most High responds by raising up other people to refute them, again and again.

At this point, a serious question faces us: Are all church historians crooked, because of their ecclesiastical bias? It is not quite as bad as that. Examples of honest researchers can be found in all denominations. Present-day examples are three Catholics, Paul Johnson, whom we often refer to, John Cornwell, who wrote *Hitler's Pope*:

The Secret History of Pius XII (1999), and Garry Wills, who scandalized many with his *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (2000).

Wills points back to Lord Acton, a great historian in the nineteenth century and another member of the Roman Church. Concerning him, Wills remarks: "Most people are familiar with Acton's famous axiom, 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely' (Acton 2.383). Fewer people remember that he was speaking of papal absolutism—more specifically, he was condemning a fellow historian's book on Renaissance Popes for letting them literally get away with murder."⁴⁶

The young Acton studied under a thorough German historian at Munich, Johann J. I. von Döllinger. Both opposed Pope Pius IX's maneuvers to have himself declared infallible at Vatican I (1870). Through painstaking research, von Döllinger was able to demonstrate how forgeries, backed by violence and sheer effrontery, became a major basis for power—especially of a temporal nature—wielded by the pontiffs who sought to dominate Western Europe, particularly the Papal State in Italy.

Starting from the premise that the papacy began with "the primacy of Peter," von Döllinger shows "How the papacy lost its early innocence, degenerating into an absolute power." This "is the long and disreputable story of forgeries and fabrications, of which the Donation of Constantine in the eighth century and the Isidorian Decretals in the ninth were only the more flagrant examples. Usurping the rights of the episcopacy and of the general councils, the papacy was finally driven to the principles and methods of the Inquisition to enforce its spurious claims, and to the theory of infallibility to elevate it beyond all human control."⁴⁷

Acton supported his teacher in rejecting the outcome of Vatican I, for Pius IX had rigged the proceedings. For instance, he saw to it that the archives were sealed to prevent any bishop from consulting them, largely excluded participants who he knew in advance would oppose his desire, ensured that everybody spoke Latin (though a majority was unable to do so or understand its Italian pronunciation), and smothered dissent through a decree "that any discussion could be cut off by mere motion on the part of ten bishops, and that any decrees of the Council could pass by a mere majority, though other Councils had aimed at consensus."⁴⁸

Both von Döllinger and Acton indignantly rejected the new doctrine of infallibility. The German scholar was excommunicated,⁴⁹ while his English pupil—who did not want to leave the Roman Church of his ancestors—suffered initial harassment from Archbishop Manning but finally found himself spared. The Vatican, having just lost the Papal State to a newly united Italy, was loath to act against a Catholic lord with high aristocratic connections in Britain,

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where he also had a reputation as "the most erudite man of his times."⁵⁰

In the twentieth century, as both Cornwell and Wills have revealed, the doctrine of papal infallibility has enmeshed the papacy as well as Europe in many and serious difficulties. How right Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was when he wrote,

O what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive!⁵¹

Perverted history is a serious problem for prophetic interpreters, who must constantly be on guard against it; it lies as though it were printed—especially, alas, if clerics have been involved. If the Bible's predictions are to be measured against past events as well as current world affairs, the record should obviously be scrutinized and presented with all the honesty at our command.