

April 27, 1981
Church History 373
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Senior, Sect. "B"

THE CONCEPT OF DOGMATISM IN KOEHLER'S HOMILETICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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The eminent Lutheran scholar Jaroslav Pelikan did not underrate the significance of John Philip Koehler as a historian. At one point Pelikan wrote, "In this observer's judgment, Koehler's LEHRBUCH is perhaps the outstanding work of its kind to come out of American Lutheranism, regardless of synod."¹ Certainly Koehler deserves to be read and studied for the perceptive insights he provides. While certainly not above censure, much of what he writes is presented in an original and highly creative way. What Allan Nevins said of the best historical works can indeed be applied to Koehler.

Why and how are the best historical works written? They are planned because the author has a vision, or an approach to one. The subject takes hold of him, inspires him, and lifts him to a plane where he sees as in a golden dream the volume he intends to write. He sees also that it must be written in a particular way: in precisely his² way and no other, with his selection of facts and his point of view.

Koehler would have given a hearty nod of approval to this statement. Yes, his history was written from his own independent viewpoint. He states in his LEHRBUCH that, "it is a mistake to suppose that the assignment of the study of history calls for a mere registration of facts without appending to them a subjective judgment."³ And really, a historian writing without conviction, without a definite viewpoint, "unbiased", is in the final analysis the worst kind of historian. John Warwick Montgomery in speaking of the ancient historian Tacitus comments:

Tacitus can teach us that history written from a definite point of view can be infinitely superior to so-called 'unbiased' history. The latter... is often no⁴ more than a mask covering presuppositions of a most gratuitous sort.

Koehler did not cloak his presuppositions but expressed them plainly in his writing. "The prime requisite for the understanding of church history is the governance of the Gospel."⁵ There indeed is the main presupposition under which Koehler operated in his writing of history. As he viewed it, the Gospel

is the main theme, the most dominant motif, which must undergird any truthful examination of church history. Any number of other motifs are observable in history, according to Koehler's view, when the historian measures everything from the touchstone of the Gospel. What we are referring to now, motifs, will hopefully become clear as we proceed, for now we are within the scope of this essay.

Before we proceed we must comment upon the title of this paper, ^{however,} This study does examine the "historiography" of the author, but the term is used not in its current sense but rather the ancient sense.⁶ The etymological meaning of "historiography" is "writing of history". This is the sense in which we employ the term. We are simply interested in looking at one aspect, in detail, of the author-historian's historical writing, the concept, theme, or as we shall call it "the motif" of dogmatism. We have called Koehler's historiography "homiletical" because the author himself viewed his writing of history that way. To him any teaching of history has to be a sermon, a homily in which he preaches a definite message. As he explained in his LEHRBUCH, "A real church history is a sermon, a proclamation of great truths."⁷ And this thought is put even more strongly in his History of the Wisconsin Synod: "...all the teaching, of whatsoever subject, in its final upshot must be a preaching of the Gospel."⁸

As we examine the historian's writing we shall discover that while he was a preacher for the Gospel in his histories, he also was preaching against things. We shall begin our formal study by first surveying: a) key motifs in Koehler's homiletical historiography; we shall then probe b) the prominence of dogmatism as an interpretive concept in his work, That shall lead into a discussion of c) dogmatism versus "dogmatics" in Koehler's history and, d)

We shall conclude with a modest evaluation of Koehler's approach to history writing.

I. SOME KEY MOTIFS IN KOEHLER'S HOMILETICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again.

It would be a fascinating study to attempt to compare the motif of "decline" as it finds expression in Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West and in J. P. Koehler's histories. The above quotation from Spengler's classic reveals what he viewed to be an underlying theme in history, the phenomena of "petrifying" or as Koehler termed it "Verstockung" (hardening). What Spengler observed in the secular world Koehler observed in the church. He viewed the "party spirit" in his church body as "still another element of the decline in our midst."¹⁰ In his "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns" Koehler warned against "externalism", "the noisy self-satisfied to-do about pure doctrine", "church-government regulations", "pietism", and "legalism", because "then the decline sets in, the decline which also shows itself outwardly in our taking over many virus-infected and beggarly elements from the sectarian churches."¹¹ In any case, Koehler read Spengler's Decline of the West and enthusiastically reflected similar conclusions in his History of the Wisconsin Synod.¹²

While more could certainly be said about the topic of "decline" or "hardening" as threads of thought in Koehler's homiletical historiography, we shall rather concentrate in this paper on some other motifs in Koehler's history. The themes of "legalism", "intellectualism", "externalism", and "dogmatism" continually surface in the author's writings. Since each, according to Koehler, mark the decline of the church and eventually contribute to "Verstockung" in the church we shall survey them briefly. The last motif^{is}, "dogmatism"; since it occupies a special prominence in this paper we shall discuss^{it} in the second and third parts in more depth.

From Koehler's own words we have seen that he viewed his history writing as "a sermon, a proclamation of great truths". In his history writing we often find him sermonizing against certain unwholesome things which are observable in the history of the church. To him these are great truths which need to be greatly avoided! The first theme under consideration is "legalism". In his commentary on Paul's epistle to the Galatians J. P. Koehler writes, "By nature, man's mind is legalistic, and when someone says we must still do this or that, such a thought finds only too ready a hearing."¹³ Legalism takes its cue from the law instead of the Gospel. This truth is echoed again and again in Holy Scripture. As the Christian historian observes the workings of the Gospel in history he is able to discern legalism at work when the Gospel truth is distorted. In his History of the Wisconsin Synod Koehler points out the obvious example of pietism as a legalistic perversion of the Gospel.¹⁴ But as he sees it another kind of "legalism" can intrude itself into the Lutheran church. In comparing Lutherans and Calvinism he writes:

But if we look at the Lutheran church as it appears 'from without' with all its shortcomings and compare it with the other part of the protestant church, Calvinism (sic), then it becomes evident that 'both have this in common' that legalism becomes a hindrance to the Gospel, 'but in a different way'. One may say that legalism appears oftener and more consistently among Calvinists than among Lutherans for the reason that the typical differences between the two shows itself in this that the Lutheran Church emphasizes justification and faith; the Reformed Church, sanctification and love. As a consequence there develops among Lutherans an "evangelical consciousness" over against the Reformed. And now it is important to understand how in spite of this "evangelical consciousness", or perhaps 'by means of' it, the legalism of the old Adam grows apace among Lutherans...Legalism obtrudes itself here in the form of 'harping on orthodoxy'.¹⁵

Legalism is an attitude which can pervert what is ostensibly loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions.¹⁶ Legalism makes the Scriptures a book of rules.¹⁷ Many other examples of this theme in Koehler's writings could be cited, but we shall move along now to a consideration of the motif of "intellectualism".

Luther called reason a whore. His typically colorful way of speaking in this case sought to express the danger of using reason wrongfully. While

reason may attempt to hide its harlotry in the matter of Christian faith, the Christian historian brings to light the misuse of reason in the ages of the church's life. This observable theme of "intellectualism" is visible when, "the interests of reason and the intellect crowd into the background the interests of the believing heart."¹⁸ Koehler attributes the problems between Buffalo and Missouri in the mid-1800's to "intellectualism".¹⁹ Similarly, in an article from the July, 1922 Theologische Quartalschrift entitled, "The Synodical Conference in the History Of The Lutheran Church in America," intellectual elements are perceived to "give off-flavor" to Synodical Conference dealings.²⁰

"Externalism" is yet another theme in the writings of this historian homiletician. St. Paul in his letter to Timothy warned about the type of outward godliness which is devoid of faith and ignorant of the workings of the Spirit of God, "having a form of godliness but denying its power". According to Koehler's observation, when men latch on to the sayings of the fathers, or subscribe to the confessions of a church body without personally claiming these teachings as their own, externalism results. The writings, sayings, confessions may be perfectly orthodox, in agreement with Scripture, but mouthing the words is not enough. Each individual Christian, each church must through personal study of the Scriptures reclaim God's truth as one's own.^(its) In Koehler's analysis "externalism" is the final outcome of what he describes as "dogmatism".²¹ It is to the study of that motif which we now turn.

II. THE PROMINENCE OF DOGMATISM AS AN INTERPRETIVE CONCEPT IN KOEHLER'S WORK.

Again and again you hear the warning against and see the results of "dogmatism" (or "dogmatizing" or "dogmatics") as Koehler bleakly paints them for us in his writings. Jordahl has described in his introduction to The History of The Wisconsin Synod ~~the~~ ^{that} the prominent role ~~of~~ ^{plays} this conception in Koehler's history.²² Any of a number of examples can be cited to demonstrate this. For one case in point we can go to the controversy regarding "state synods" which

happened in the middle of the 1800's in this country. When other Lutherans invaded Wisconsin such as the Buffalo men Missouri classed all opponents together, including Wisconsin Synod men stating that they had no business in Wisconsin, where Lutherans of the Missouri Synod had already preceded. What subsequently happened was strife, increasing friction between Missouri and Wisconsin men. Koehler sums up the problem by concluding that, "It was all dogmatism, that lacked the historical point of view..."²³ In the beginning years of the Synodical Conference at the Wisconsin Synod's 1877 Watertown meeting the discussion of the 1876 Synodical Conference resolutions was agitated by dissension. Why? "The critics failed to clarify the matter, because of their own dogmatical approach..."²⁴ Again, when the Election Controversy flared, Koehler attributed the problem between the Schmidt party and the Walther party as one of dogmatism. His analysis gives some insight into the cause of such disagreement. "Such dogmatism is always apt to crop up when the one-sided study of dogmatics prevails and lacks the balance-wheel of thorough research in exegesis."²⁵ With regard to Synod's Indian mission endeavor Koehler found dogmatism operating in the Synod's interpretation of the Lord's great commission.

There was something not entirely sound about Synod's heathen-mission endeavor, the idea that a church is not living up to its mission unless it engages in heathen-mission work, according to the the Lord's great commission: Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. That idea is dogmatism, with a streak of pietism...²⁶

When work on the large Agende was the subject of much discussion in the 1890's, with Prof. Graebner, Praeses von Rohr and Professors Hoenecke and E. Notz providing the brunt of the labor "dogmatism" was discovered doing its dastardly deed.

The work on the Agende revealed the prevailing dogmatical interest. The addition of responses and collects did not grow from an actual want but was prompted by the dogmatical desire to harmonize them with the content of the pericopes.²⁷

The theme of "dogmatism" appears over and over again in this historian's writings. It even surfaces when Koehler examines various art forms. In a

Quartalschrift article entitled, "Our Forms of Expression in Poetry and Music Measured and Compared with the Forms of Scripture, of Luther, and of the Lutheran Congregation Hymn of the 16th Century," examines a musical composition by Herzberger, Schumacher, and Reuter entitled "At Eventide". There too a "bureaucratic-dogmatic" concept, ill-suited to lyric poetry" is discovered.²⁸ Interestingly enough Koehler finds no fault with the German rendering of the Allegro. It is when the German comes over into the English that the German expression is given a dogmatical bent, "ill-suited to lyric poetry."

With all this talk, or rather this sermonizing against "dogmatics" and "dogmatism" one might wonder whether dogmatics as a seminary subject is acceptable to J. P. Koehler. Does not his preaching against "dogmatism" in so many of his writings indicate that he was at odds with dogmatics as we know it our Wisconsin Synod Seminary? These questions are discussed in our next section entitled:

III. DOGMATISM VERSUS "DOGMATICS" IN KOEHLER'S HISTORY.

One might get the impression from Jordahl's introduction to The History of The Wisconsin Synod that Koehler and the so-called "Wauwatosa Theology" stood against dogmatics as a subject. He writes:

As the Wauwatosa Theology developed it was to protest a methodology, pervasive in Lutheran orthodoxy, in which the dominance of dogmatics actually put the historical and connected study of Scripture out of business. Even where Scripture study was practiced it bowed under the tyranny of dogmatics.²⁹

It can be clearly shown from Koehler's own writings that he did not disapprove of dogmatics as a seminary subject, nor did he prohibit the compilation of dogmatics text books. But for Koehler dogmatics ^{dare} never replace the study of the language of Scripture itself. All dogmatics must have as its base historical-exegetical work in the original languages. With this said whole-hearted approval is given to dogmatics. Even as late as 1926 an address to the students at the opening of the Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary's school year commended such a study of "Dogmatics". He says:

Thus the study of dogmatics is also language study. Dogmatics as we teach it here in the right scriptural way is a compendium of the doctrinal fruits derived from exegetical and historical Bible study. For lack of time it is impossible for us to cover the whole Bible and to treat all doctrines exegetically here at our seminary. For the same reason we are unable to pursue all trends of thought in history as thoroughly and intensively as necessary for each specific case. Then, too, in both cases the doctrines project themselves in their individual environment, so that the general inner thought connection recedes for many a student. For that reason as a conclusion of Bible and history study, a compendium of all doctrines and their conceptual elaboration is desirable. It is superfluous³⁰ to point out again how this study is primarily a matter of language study.

It should be obvious from Koehler's own words that at times he uses the word "dogmatics" in a good sense. We have shown in Part II that at times "dogmatics" is used to refer to a method of "doing" the subject of Dogmatics improperly, apart from Scriptural considerations. "Dogmatics" for Koehler also has a bad connotation! (From this point on in our paper, aside from the quotes from Koehler, we shall use the term "Dogmatics" to refer to the proper kind of dogmatics, which he commended. The term "dogmatism" will refer to the dogmatical method which is criticized and condemned.) But repeatably in his works we are given guidelines how to continue in "dogmatics" and escape "dogmatism". In an essay entitled "Art And Dogmatics" which Faith-Life printed in June, 1931 the "right kind of dogmatical study" is described.

When the theologian neglects his study of the Bible, he is also neglecting his dogmatical study, for the right kind of dogmatical study involves keeping in intimate touch with the Bible.³¹

If a dogmatician does not stay in intimate contact with the Bible there is always danger that his use of "dogmatics" may metamorphose into "dogmatism". At one point our historian shows how "legalism" and "intellectualism" (cf. Part I) may pervert the rightful use of dogmatics. This is brought out in "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns" where he writes:

When the dogmatician arrays the doctrines in a book, he cannot give exhaustive exegetical discussions. The natural result: there is short references to the Scriptures.⁽⁶¹⁹⁾ But when in the inner recesses of the mind of the teacher, in his manner of working, and granted no design of disrespect against the Scriptures on his part, his position to Scriptures as over against his party's doctrine is so off-balanced that the Scripture must serve to force his party's doctrine into the foreground, then we not only have the legalistic doings... but the legalism of the intellectualist

in addition. Scripture passages torn from their context, or, like a worn dime, having lost their distinctive impress, now must serve as citations from a codex of decrees. The purely intellectual understanding steps to the fore. Still more is this the case when the interpretation of the text has not been won directly from Scripture by the author himself, through personal experience, but rather has been copied for generations from one book to another. That generates legalism.³²

So it is that "legalism" and "intellectualism" have their share in the promotion of "dogmatism". And as Koehler states, the final fate of "dogmatism" is "externalism", having a form of godliness, but denying its power! But if all of these motifs in Koehler's homiletical historiography occupy such a major part of his history writing, we might question how that ties in with the statement, "...all the teaching, of whatsoever subject, in its final upshot must be a preaching of the Gospel." (see above p. 2)

The answer to this question is simple if we keep in mind that to Koehler the Gospel is the touchstone by which all observable history is measured. The Gospel is a matter of faith! It is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, by faith! The Christian historian working under such presuppositions is able to observe when reason supplants faith in the life of the church. Koehler called this "intellectualism". Similarly, where the law supplants the Gospel freedom, there "legalism" is ascertainable. When the inner life of faith is wanting, one is indeed able, to a degree, to observe "externalism" in the workings of the life of the church. Likewise, "dogmatics" which serves the Gospel, and which is a summation of all the truths of Scripture, easily undermines the Gospel when it deteriorates into the shell of "dogmatism". All of these negative motifs in Koehler's homiletical historiography are enemies of the Gospel, and can cause the faith-life of the church to petrify and end in death ~~as a result of the view~~. In preaching the Gospel Koehler is an apologist for the Gospel. He must criticize dogmatism in order to make the church aware of how it may lose the Gospel. And so in the final analysis the Gospel is the compelling force in his historiography, even in consideration of the motif of "dogmatism" versus "dogmatics".

With that point we shall move on and conclude with:

IV. A MODEST EVALUATION OF KOEHLER'S APPROACH TO HISTORY WRITING.

A person cannot read the historical works of J. P. Koehler without seconding the evaluation of Pelikan that Koehler's work is an outstanding example of true creative scholarship. His Gospel viewpoint is finally the only way the Christian can approach the subject of history. To relegate all the goings on in history to the realm of the "secular" apart from any conscious screening with the eyes of faith is impossible. While the secular historian will charge such an approach to history ~~as~~ as "biased" in the final analysis it is the most objective viewpoint. It alone examines the world with an all-encompassing objective weltanschauung, because it takes into account the revealed Word of God.

Koehler's historiography is Lutheran. Therefore its vision of church history is broader than the Roman Catholic or Reformed historian's viewpoint. That is, since his approach to history writing is founded on the Bible, sublimating reason to faith he is able to point out "intellectualism" in the Calvinists. Obviously, the Calvinist, according to his very theological system, elevates reason to a place no Lutheran could in good conscience. On the other hand the Roman Catholic with his penchant for "traditionalism" has a narrow view of true church history in so much as his grasp of the Gospel is distorted by a false weltanschauung.

Koehler's insights into the proper study of "dogmatics" is indeed valuable. Pastors, in whatever capacity they serve the church of Christ, must continually immerse themselves in Scripture. No dogmatics text, not even the Lutheran Confessions dare replace the Holy Scriptures as the primary tool in our theological studies. Koehler's insistence on study of the original languages of the Bible is as thoroughly Lutheran as can be. Historical-exegetical study is still the bedrock of all sound Christian scholarship. The catalog for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary echoes this idea by stating that "A good working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is a prerequisite for work in the courses in Biblical Interpretation at our Seminary." It insists that, "Thorough, intensive, and reverent study of the Holy Scriptures

is the very heart of our Seminary training." One fears that many pastors who lose their polish with Hebrew and Greek, as the years wear by, must to a greater or lesser degree resort to a form of "dogmatism" in their ministries. When the big issues of the church, the doctrinal debates, plagues of false teachers, accost them, not being able to claim the truth through intensive Bible study, what avenue is left but to choose a "canned line" or "form of orthodoxy" without the conviction of a studied heart? Koehler truly creates a desire in your heart to keep up with personal, intensive Bible study. What is more he fires up in one's heart the beauty of a life of faith in Christ the Savior.

Without citing any specific examples, the latter part of Koehler's History of The Wisconsin Synod seems to lack the depth which one finds in the first half. That he is a protestant writing seems obvious at times, for he seems to involve himself in what are almost personal vendettas against the Synod. Because the last part of the Synod's story is autobiographical, Koehler himself being mentioned frequently, objectivity wanes.

One detects also in much of Koehler's writing that he can be almost too creative in his approach. At one point he criticizes those who ~~write~~ ~~write~~ ~~write~~ ^{criticize} ~~write~~ ~~write~~ ~~write~~ ^{new} creative modes ^{of} ~~to~~ expressing old truths.

When someone expresses himself in a way different from what we are accustomed to we then apply the yardstick of our own mode of expression and of course misunderstand him, i.e. do not understand him in the way he wishes to be understood. ³³

Recent essays in our Synod, written in "creative" ways have proven to be more confusing than they were helpful to fellow believers. One must always be careful to create only that which remains in the "form of sound words".

While J. P. Koehler, like each of us, could be faulted for certain other idiosyncrasies, we choose to evaluate his writings as worthy of study. There are many writings of Koehler, which deserve to be resurrected, read and gleaned for that which is useful. Certainly not all of his writings are worth holding on to. Even Koehler admitted that:

I expect neither my students nor other readers to accept uncritically the propositions and judgments which have not been specifically ratified by God's Word.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Concordia Theological Monthly, XXIII (January, 1952), pp. 50-51.
- ² Allan Nevins, "The Old History and the New," in The Art of History (Washington: Library of Congress, 1967), p. 12.
- ³ J. P. Koehler, Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte, trans. by Philemon Hensel in Faith-Life, LI, No. 2 (March/April, 1978), p. 11.
- ⁴ John W. Montgomery, The Shape of the Past (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), p. 41.
- ⁵ Koehler, op. cit.
- ⁶ Montgomery, op. cit., p. 7.
- ⁷ Koehler, op. cit., p. 12.
- ⁸ Koehler, The History of The Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud: Sentinel Publishing Co, 1970), p. 139.
- ⁹ Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, Vol. I: Form and Actuality, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 31.
- ¹⁰ Koehler "Unsere poetisch-musikalischen Ausdrucksformen, gemessen an den Formen der Schrift, Luthers und des lutherischen Gemeindelieds im XVI. Jahrhundert. Studien ueber den Text At Eventide von Herzberger, Schumacher und Reuter." in the Quartalschrift, XIV, 177, April, 1917. Trans. by Marcus Koch in Faith-Life, XXXIX, No. 4 (July/August, 1956), p.7.
- ¹¹ Koehler, "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns" Translated from the Quartalschrift 1914-15 by A. Hillmer in Faith-Life, XXV, No. 7 (July, 1952), p. 9.
- ¹² This point is discussed by Leigh Jordahl in his "Introduction" to The History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970), p. X.
- ¹³ Koehler, The Epistle of Paul To The Galatians, trans from the German by E. E. Sauer (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1957), p. 19.
- ¹⁴ Koehler, op. cit., p. 15.
- ¹⁵ Koehler "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns" Trans from Quartalschrift 1914-15 by A. Hillmer in Faith-Life, XXV, No. 8 (August, 1952), p. 9.
- ¹⁶ Koehler "Unsere poetisch..etc..." op. cit. p. 7.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 8.
- ¹⁸ Koehler "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns", op. cit.
- ¹⁹ Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod, op. cit., p. 33.
- ²⁰ This quote from the Quartalschrift is translated in Faith-Life, XXIX, No. 5 (May, 1956) by Paul Hensel, p. 8.
- ²¹ Koehler, The History of The Wisconsin Synod, op. cit., p. 168.
- ²² Ibid., pp. xvii ff.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 79.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 146.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 158.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 198.

FOOTNOTES

- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 228.
- ²⁸ Koehler, "Unsere poetisch...etc." translated by Marcus Koch in Faith-Life, XXXIX, No. 5 (September/October, 1966), p. 5.
- ²⁹ Koehler, op. cit., p. x.
- ³⁰ Koehler's address "Theological Language Study" in the October, 1926 Quartalschrift, trans. by W. F. Beitz in Faith-Life, XXXVII, No. 9 (September, 1964), p. 9.
- ³¹ Koehler, "Art and Dogmatics", in Faith-Life, IV, No. 6 (June, 1931), p. 11.
- ³² Koehler, "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns", Trans. by A. Hillmer in Faith-Life, XXV, No. 9 (September, 1952), p. 12.
- ³³ Koehler, "Unsere poetisch...etc." translated by Marcus Koch in Faith-Life, XXXIX, No. 3 (May/June, 1966), p. 7.
- ³⁴ Koehler, "Compendium of Church History" translated from Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte by Philemon Hensel in Faith-Life, L, No. 3 (May/June, 1977), p. 10.

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