With apologies to the authors of *The Corrupting Sea*, which was an answer to Braudel's work on the Mediterranean,¹ I would like to address a topic that I think is important to us as a society and as a dedicated group of scholars. It is a topic difficult to come to grips with because it is somewhat nebulous; indeed, it is not so much a topic as an attitude. It is an attitude that we all suffer from. I do not mean that you or some of you suffer from it but that we all—that includes me—have a problem. How often have we said, ‘So-and-so has this thesis. I’ve read it (or heard a paper on it or had comments whispered to me in a dark alley) and it is (or isn’t) very well presented; it does (or does not) have good arguments for it, but in the final analysis I don’t think it stands up. One point not taken into account is such and such.’ And so on. Or maybe the comment is, ‘I can’t put my finger on it yet, but I think there is a major flaw in there somewhere.’ If we were forced at gunpoint to give a show of hands of who had said words to that effect, I would be the first to have to put up my hand. We are scholars; this is our first and normal reaction.

By this I do not mean that we are always negative to new ideas or theses. But a healthy sense of scepticism—a ‘show me’ attitude—listening with our arms folded—this is our metier. It is our job to evaluate arguments, to probe them, dissect them, and pull them apart for weaknesses: whether student essays, dissertations or theses; or articles or manuscripts that come to us as editors of journals and monograph series; or just in scholarly debates in defending our own ideas and attacking the opposition. It would be wrong to give this up. I am not issuing a plea to be nicer to one another—most of us in this country are so polite you sometimes

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¹ This paper was originally presented as the presidential address to the Society for Old Testament Study, 5 January 2009. I offer my grateful thanks to the Society for electing me as President for 2009. Although this version has had footnotes added and some other revisions applied, it still retains the original style for oral delivery.

have a hard time knowing whether someone is actually disagreeing with you or not—it can be like being mugged by Shaun the Sheep.

But what I have in mind is a general institutional mind-set of the academy. This is to overvalue consensus. It can be subtle, slow, and ponderous, but before you know it this relentless academic bulldozer has a way of grinding down new ideas, especially radical ones, and especially of crushing new scholars who may espouse radical ideas. Unfortunately, this process of bringing people to heel begins when we are students. You quickly learn which ideas are accepted, which are radical but harmless, and which are eccentric and can be laughed out of court. We learn that there are certain ideas you can ignore but others you dare not challenge.

As students you were always conscious of where the consensus lay, or at least the point of view favoured by your Doktorvater. Some academics had the courage—or was it just bloody-mindedness?—to differ from the consensus. It was an interesting exercise to see how these mavericks were evaluated. For their students, they were almost always seen as the wave of the future, or at least as a martyr to the truth. In some cases other scholars did not follow them but nevertheless openly respected them. Others quickly gained the sobriquet of ‘individualist’, ‘eccentric’, or even ‘crank’.

It is also frequently the case in some parts of the world that students of a particular individual form a ‘school’. I do not know that the students are told they all have to believe the same thing, but it certainly seems to work out that way in practice. I shall not name any names, but one in particular makes me cross. After coming to the UK I was not able to attend the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature for about 10 years. When I finally managed to get to a meeting, I saw a session on textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible, for which I had a particular interest, and attended. It was awful. It was dominated by recent Harvard PhDs, and they were all spouting Frank Cross’s line on the Hebrew Bible text, one which I thought was wrong and still think so. I mentioned this to my friend Eugene Ulrich, who is himself a student of Cross, and he acknowledged that ‘Frank does tend to be a dominant individual’ or words to that effect. But he did point out that as time went on, most Cross students did learn to take a more independent line, and I must say that he himself is evidence of it.

A few years ago I got an invitation to apply for a post at my alma mater. I was not sure I wanted to return to that part of the world, but I duly filled in an application and sent it off. After a few weeks we began to near the time that the SBL annual meeting took place. It was