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Professor MacGregor, Dr. Laidlaw and the Case of William Robertson Smith

by John W. Keddie

On December 7, 1875, Volume III of the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica appeared. It included an entry under the caption "Bible", contributed by the Professor of Hebrew in the Free Church College, Aberdeen, William Robertson Smith, then a young man of twenty-nine. On March 3, 1876, alluding to some criticisms of the article which had come to his ears, Professor James Macgregor, of the Chair of Systematic Theology in New College, Edinburgh, and a former teacher of Smith's, wrote to warn him that it might bring him some trial of his "Christian wisdom and fortitude", adding: "I am thankful you have spoken out what must soon be said by some one, and what ought to be said first by our qualified experts in Old Testament study." The centenary of these events provides an appropriate occasion for publishing the following article by Mr. Keddie, an accountant by profession and a member of the Free Church of Scotland.

JAMES MACGREGOR, D.D. (1830-1894), was Professor of Systematic Theology in the New College, Edinburgh, at the time the Robertson Smith case occupied the attention of the Free Church of Scotland (1877-1881), and the Rev. John Laidlaw, D.D. (1832-1906), was MacGregor's successor to that Chair after the latter's resignation and emigration to New Zealand in 1881.¹

Interest in the position of Professor MacGregor in the Smith Case lies particularly in the following factors: First, he was the Professor of an important Chair of Theology in what was regarded as one of the foremost theological colleges in the English-speaking world. Consequently, as Smith's biographers put it, ". . . Professor MacGregor, as Professor of Dogmatic Theology, was perhaps entitled, and even bound, to have an opinion on the questions raised by Smith's article."² Secondly, the position of MacGregor (and Laidlaw) receives scant mention in standard church history volumes and has received little, if any, attention even in those works which

- ¹ See Hugh Watt, *New College, Edinburgh—A Centenary History* (Edinburgh, 1946), pp. 229, 230.
- ² J. S. Black and G. Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London, 1912), p. 186. (Referring to the article "Bible" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., 1875.)

have been regarded as authorities on that case.³ It is therefore relatively unfamiliar and undocumented ground both from the theological and historical points of view. Furthermore, it is of some interest and relevance to note that MacGregor himself was a strict Calvinist who adhered strongly to the doctrines of the Westminster Confession of Faith and who was also an ardent apologete for the traditional views of revelation over against the higher critical theories and reconstructions.⁴

It is the writer's sincere hope that this brief discussion of certain aspects of the case of William Robertson Smith will prove to be a useful contribution to an evangelical understanding of that most controversial of controversies.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a useful biographical *memoir* of Professor John Laidlaw by Professor H. R. Mackintosh, prefixed to a (posthumous) volume of Laidlaw's sermons,⁵ there is reference to the case of Professor William Robertson Smith which throws 'light' on the position taken in that case by James MacGregor. We know from references to the case in MacGregor's own writings that it was he who was responsible for writing the motion which was presented to the Free Church Assembly in 1880 by the Rev. John Laidlaw (then a minister in Aberdeen), and which, with modification, did not differ greatly from the motion of the Rev. Alex. Beith (Stirling) which ultimately carried in the Smith case that year.⁶ Basically, Laidlaw's motion, as originally framed (by MacGregor), declared "the views promulgated by Professor Smith to be not those of the Free Church, but inasmuch as they do not directly contradict the doctrine of the Confession, replacing him in his chair with an admonition."⁷ Beith's motion, not

³ See for example J. R. Fleming's *Church History of Scotland, 1875-1929* (1933); C. G. McCrie's *Confessions of the Church of Scotland* (1907); and the biographies of *James Begg* (Smith, 1888), *David Brown* (Blaikie, 1898), *Robert Rainy* (Simpson, 1909), and *Alexander Whyte* (Barbour, 1923). Notable exceptions are Norman L. Walker's *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (1895), and Black and Chrystal's biography of *Robertson Smith* (op. cit.).

Cf. MacGregor's *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics* (Edinburgh, 1894), pp. 238 ff. Prof. W. B. Greene, Jr., of Princeton wrote of MacGregor's earlier work, *The Apology of the Christian Religion* (Edinburgh, 1891), that it was "written in the spirit of strong . . . opposition to the Higher Criticism" (*Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, V, 1894, p. 110). See also H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation* (London, 1963), pp. 271-273. As regards MacGregor's orthodoxy cf. Prof. S. D. F. Salmond, *Critical Review*, V, 1895, p. 83; *British Weekly*, 423, XVII (1894), p. 99.

H. R. Mackintosh, *Introductory Memoir*, pp. 1-47, prefixed to John Laidlaw, *Studies in the Parables* (London, 1907). Mackintosh (1870-1936) succeeded Laidlaw in the Chair of Dogmatics at New College, upon the latter's resignation in 1904. (See Watt, op. cit., pp. 230-231.)

dissimilar to Laidlaw's, additionally contained a censure of Smith "on account of offensiveness in his manner of dealing with Holy Scripture" (thus MacGregor⁶). Later, following Mackintosh, who faithfully and concisely summarizes the 1880 Assembly speech of Laidlaw, we shall discuss in detail the position of Laidlaw and MacGregor in the case. However, at this point it is perhaps apposite, in the interests of completeness, to outline the pertinent facts in what was a drawn-out and not uncomplicated case.

II. ROBERTSON SMITH

A brilliant theological student, William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), within weeks (literally) of his having completed the normal course of training for the ministry at New College, Edinburgh, was appointed to the Chair of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College, Aberdeen by the Free Assembly of 1870. It was not long, however, before it became apparent "that the advanced views which had become current in Germany and Holland were affecting his own opinions as to the history and character of the Bible."⁹ Matters came to a head in 1876 after the appearance of an article by him entitled "Bible" in the 9th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It was manifestly clear from that article that his views of the literary structure of the Old Testament closely approximated to those of the Continental Bible critics, Karl Graf, Abraham Kuenen, and Julius Wellhausen (especially the latter's), which views have been appropriately designated the *development*

⁶ MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth etc.* (Dunedin, 1890), pp. 20-21. Cf. MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics* (Edinburgh, 1894), p. 338; Mackintosh (op. cit., p. 32): "Dr. Laidlaw . . . made the proposal, which was backed by Professor James MacGregor in a powerful speech . . ." (cf. also p. 34, loc. cit.): *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (hereinafter *Proceedings*), Edinburgh, 1880, pp. 187-189 (speech of Dr. Laidlaw); pp. 189-193 (speech of Professor MacGregor); and Norman L. Walker, *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1895), pp. 282-284. See also J. S. Black and G. Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London, 1912), p. 352.

⁷ Walker, op. cit., pp. 282-283. Cf. *Daily Review*, Thursday, July 20, 1876, letter from "Presbyter": ". . . these positions . . . do not directly affect any matter of Christian faith as confessed by our Churches . . . They do not . . . directly collide with any doctrine ever affirmed by any Christian Church in the world" ("Professor Smith's Article 'Bible'"). For the identification of MacGregor as "Presbyter" see Black and Chrystal, op. cit., p. 186, and cf. G. Macaulay's "Presbyter's" *Defence of Robertson Smith Examined* (Edinburgh, 1876). Regarding the sentiments expressed cf. *Proceedings*, 1880, p. 187.

⁸ MacGregor, *Studies in the History etc.*, p. 338. For the complete text of Beith's motion see Walker, op. cit., p. 283. (Cf. *Proceedings*, 1880, pp. 243-244.)

⁹ Walker, op. cit., p. 272. For a useful terse summary of the views expressed by Smith see C. G. MacCrie, *Confessions of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1907), pp. 180 ff.

hypothesis (thus Young¹⁰). Their reconstructions and dating of Israel's history and literature were largely informed by naturalistic evolutionary principles and Hegelian philosophy.¹¹ It is of interest to note that Smith spent two periods of study in Germany, in 1867 and again in 1869, where he clearly was much influenced by men like Richard Rothe (Bonn) and Albert Ritschl (Gottingen), under both of whom he studied, and that at that time he was profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.¹² The influence, too, of A. B. Davidson (1831-1902), Smith's Old Testament Professor in Edinburgh, must not be minimized. Smith called Davidson his "master" and it was with some justification that Macleod wrote:

Davidson's teaching became the source of an alien infusion in Old Testament studies in Scotland. Robertson Smith caught the infection and spread the plague.¹³

III. THE FACTS OF THE CASE

The views of Smith, thus moulded by alien critical and philosophical principles, came with shocking suddenness to the attention of the Free Church of Scotland. At that time (1876) the Free Church could be considered a theologically orthodox and conservative communion and therefore, as Walker says:

. . . it need cause no surprise . . . that a violent commotion was produced when a professor wrote an article in which no reference was made to the supernatural origin of the Bible, and in which the composition of several books was dealt with in the very freest manner, as if they had been put together by the wit of man alone. With criticism of this sort the Church was entirely unacquainted . . . the blow fell without warning.¹⁴

The content of the article "Bible" was first of all brought to the attention of the College Committee in 1876 and a report was submitted therefrom to the Assembly of 1877, affirming insufficient grounds for a charge of heresy against Smith, though some points were thought unsatisfactory, as for example the question of the historicity of Deuteronomy. Earlier in 1877 (March) a Commission of Assembly had instructed the Aberdeen Presbytery to examine Smith's article(s), invite his own explanation thereof, and report back. In connection with some questions on the matter which certain

¹⁰ E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (London, 1964), pp. 136-138. This hypothesis has been otherwise popularly known as the Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen hypothesis. For an able refutation thereof see Young, *ibid.*, pp. 139-141.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹² Ronald R. Nelson, "The Theological Development of the Young Robertson Smith", *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, XLV, No. 2, April-June 1973, pp. 88-96. For a Reformed evaluation of the place and significance of Kant for modern protestanism see Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Nutley, N. J., 1971), pp. 106-131.

¹³ John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1946²), p. 288.

¹⁴ Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-273.

Presbytery members wished to put to Smith but were disallowed, an appeal was made direct to the Assembly of 1877 from the Presbytery. And thus, both through the College Committee and the Aberdeen Presbytery the case was suddenly brought before the Free Church Assembly of 1877. The decision of that Assembly on the case was merely to suspend Smith pending the completion of the investigation of the Aberdeen Presbytery. This decision aroused Smith, who thereupon indicated his wish that a libel be drawn up in order to necessitate a *judicial process*. This demand the Assembly acceded to and, via the Aberdeen Presbytery, duly prepared a libel for heresy against Smith. The original libel comprised three general and eight specific charges. The former of these and seven of the latter, were in due time regarded as being irrelevant.¹⁵ The libel therefore was eventually reduced to one count only, namely, that Professor Smith held the opinion that Deuteronomy was not a *genuine* historical record, that it was of late date, and that it was written by someone who passed it off as being the work of Moses (which of course, it could not have been) or, in other words, that it involved deception on the part of the *actual* author.¹⁶ It was in 1879 that this amended libel finally came before the General Assembly of the Church and was served on Professor Smith. Smith thereafter conducted an admittedly brilliant case, and after some objections on points of order and relevance, the matter was passed over to the following Assembly (1880), where the decision was taken to abandon the libel (as outlined above.) That decision, however, did not conclude the case for, shortly after, another article by Smith, this time on "Hebrew Language and Literature," appeared in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The contents of this new article were even more fitted to offend the conservative section of the Church, with the result that the matter was, inevitably, brought again to the attention of the Church and in the Assembly of 1881 the momentous decision was taken to remove Smith from his Chair on the grounds that it was no longer considered "safe or advantageous for the Church that Professor Smith should continue to teach in one of her Colleges" (to quote the conclusion of the motion of Principal Robert Rainy which was finally carried¹⁷). It should be understood that Smith was *not* deposed for heresy (there was no libel—it had been dropped the previous year),

15 "To find a charge 'relevant' is to find that, if proved, it would involve censure. In charges of immorality the 'proof' is a separate matter from the relevancy. But in a charge of heresy, separate proof is not needed, because the matter dealt with is in the author's own writings. If it be found 'relevant', or contrary to the standards, the case is finished" (W. G. Blaikie, *David Brown* [London, 1898], p. 205).

16 Walker, p. 280 (for a summary of the original charges and the text of the reduced libel). Cf. MacGregor, *Studies in the History etc.*, pp. 337-338.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 288-289 (for the complete text of Rainy's motion). See *Proceedings*, 1881, p. 77.

neither did he forfeit his status as a minister of the Church—though he afterwards refused the stipend¹⁸—but he was removed from the Chair on the principal ground that he had lost the confidence of the Church. In other words, it amounted to merely a no-confidence vote. Shortly afterwards (1883) Smith was appointed Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, where he also later became Librarian. After a brilliant academic career, in which he developed more fully and explicitly the critical positions of his friend Wellhausen, Smith died in Cambridge in 1894 at the comparatively early age of forty-seven.

IV. THE POSITION OF LAIDLAW AND MACGREGOR

In the Assembly deliberations of 1880 on the libel process in the Robertson Smith case, four motions were tabled. Those of Beith and Laidlaw have been briefly summarized above. Of the other two motions, one proposed by Sir Henry Moncrieff maintained (in similar vein to that of Rainy, which was ultimately carried the following year) that as Smith had in large measure forfeited the confidence of the Church, his Chair should be declared vacant. The other motion, by James Begg—a man of decidedly conservative views—had urged the Assembly to proceed directly to prove the libel. Over against these positions, Laidlaw and MacGregor maintained that, as Smith could not be censured for, or charged with, any deviation from the Confessional *doctrine* of the Church (as they believed, but see below), the libel should be passed from, though not without (a) an admonition of Smith to exercise caution and desist from teaching the critical views; and (b) a declaration that his views were not those of the Free Church.¹⁹ Against the first motion (Moncrieff's) Laidlaw objected that, whilst it was true that, abstractly speaking, the Church had a right to set aside office-bearers on the grounds that they had lost the confidence of the Church, "he denied that this procedure was appropriate in a case where a *judicial process had already been entered on.*"²⁰ That would only serve to "shed a lurid light on the peculiar precariousness of the tenure of office enjoyed by the professors. It suggested a discipline so flexible as to be seriously unworthy."²¹ On the other hand, against Begg's motion Laidlaw objected that it might end in a verdict of "not proven" and, as he strongly disapproved of Smith's views, he feared (not without justification) that any such result would mean that these views "might

¹⁸ MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth, etc.*, p. 20; W. G. Blaikie, *David Brown* (London, 1898), p. 207.

¹⁹ Cf. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 286; *Proceedings*, 1880, p. 187. The motion of Laidlaw only received 51 votes in the division, against 244 for Beith's (*Proceedings*, 1880, p. 243).

²⁰ Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 32 (emphasis mine—J.K.); cf. *Proceedings*, 1880, p. 187.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32; *Proceedings*, 1880, p. 188.

correctly be described as having triumphantly survived a judicial process."²² Laidlaw clearly thought that *either* to condemn Smith by (say) a narrow majority, *or* to remove him from his chair on the grounds that he had merely lost the confidence of the Church, would not carry much weight in the Christian Church at large. Furthermore, even more serious in his opinion was the fact that "views which he thought dangerous and rashly assumed would thereby only receive wider currency."²³ This is an important consideration in Laidlaw's line of argumentation for he felt that "if they deprived Professor Smith of his chair *after* libel, still more if they deprived him *after dropping* the libel, they would not stamp out his views."²⁴ If, on the other hand, he was sent back to his professorate with a declaration that his views were not acquiesced in by the Church, and enjoined to avoid matters of higher criticism and "imaginary literary hypotheses," there was a possibility that those matters would be relegated to the subordinate place they deserved.²⁵ Clearly Laidlaw hoped that the views espoused by Smith would be rebuffed in due time, though he felt that, far from being achieved by a libel action—or any such disciplinary process—such a process would probably give greater currency to the views. No doubt as long as he felt that an assurance was obtained along the lines he suggested, then these opinions could be left without danger to subsequent study, which would (he believed) show them up for what they were—"imaginary." In the event this conviction, not uncommon amongst 'conservatives' at that time—most notably Alexander Whyte, who was however even more irenic and pro-Smith than Laidlaw—was too optimistic, as subsequent history has clearly demonstrated.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the following points on the Robertson Smith case in general, and James MacGregor's position therein in particular are offered by way of comment:

1. First, as to the *ecclesiastical process* in the case itself, it would seem fully justified to maintain that the libel as originally framed, and as finally reduced (to one count), was always too clumsy and/or too atomistic. It is at least arguable that if, as suggested by Walker,²⁶ a more direct and perspicuous indictment had been framed in the first place, such as: "You hold and teach a view of the Holy Scriptures which impugns and discredits the same as the supreme authoritative and infallible Word of God written and an inerrant source

²² Ibid, p. 33; *Proceedings*, p. 188.

²³ Ibid, p. 33; *Proceedings*, p. 188.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 33; *Proceedings*, p. 188.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 33; *Proceedings*, p. 189.

²⁶ Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-291. The form cited is a free adaptation of that suggested by Walker.

of religious truth" libel might have been proved. However, one must appreciate the extent to which the views expounded by Smith had *already* gained currency within the Free Church of Scotland through Smith's teacher A. B. Davidson, who had been first Lecturer and Tutor (assistant to John "Rabbi" Duncan), and later Professor, of Old Testament at New College since 1863, and over whose teaching there had been scarcely a tremor within the Church.²⁷ Davidson's position, however, was less explicit and more cautious than that of the Continental critics, and it seems that he was of a more diffident disposition than his somewhat rash and impetuous student. To the end of his days Davidson never really reconciled his (generally orthodox) theological views with his critical views.²⁸ It may easily be imagined therefore, that it would be all the more difficult to *prove* inconsistency between Confessional *doctrine(s)* and the critical positions.

2. Secondly, the case was undoubtedly complicated by Smith's strong affirmations of adherence to the Westminster Confession and to truly Reformation principles. The use of evangelical terminology by such men in conveying their views served to impress many orthodox conservative theologians such as MacGregor.²⁹ As a result a basically dualistic stance was promoted. Writing fifty years later, Donald Maclean, with great insight, succinctly outlined this position:

A frank dualism is proposed in which a man can be a "traditionalist" and a "modernist" at the same time by the use of evangelical phraseology cannot-

²⁷ But see Macleod, *op. cit.*, p. 288: "Dr. Duncan, when his junior colleague, A. B. Davidson, began to show signs of going off on rationalistic lines, . . . called in the help of [George] Smeaton to do what he could to reclaim him."

²⁸ Cf.: "One gains the impression that Dr. Davidson's views in regard to the content of truth of the Old Testament were substantially worked out in a period previous to his aligning himself with the modern hypothesis. Afterward the critical conclusions were superimposed, but they did not have time materially to reshape the body of doctrinal convictions" (Geerhardus Vos, in a review of Davidson's *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1904, in *The Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. IV, 1906, p. 119). [Professor G. W. Anderson's presidential address to the Edinburgh Congress of the International Organization for Old Testament Study (August 1974) was devoted to "Two Scottish Semitists" (A. B. Davidson and W. R. Smith) and paid sympathetic attention to Davidson's silence during Smith's trial, applying to the older scholar the words of Ennius about Fabius: *unus homo nobis cunctando restituit rem* (see *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. XXVIII, 1975, pp. ix-xix). Ed.]

²⁹ Cf. MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth etc.*, p. 20: "He [Smith] . . . was earnestly in sympathy with the Church's evangelical faith"; *Daily Review*, *op. cit.*: "It is perhaps a good thing that the positions have been maintained among us by a Christian teacher so earnest and pronounced in his evangelism as Professor Smith" (cf. Blaikie, *op. cit.*, p. 198; and A. R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution*, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 171: "He [Smith] was an earnest evangelical who accepted the Calvinist doctrines of the Westminster Confession").

ing entirely different conceptions from what a modernist actually believes. In this way they shall *appear* to hold evangelical beliefs while accepting modernist critical views.³⁰

With special reference to the Robertson Smith case, Thomas Carlyle exposed the futility of attempting to maintain such a dualistic position when he said: "Have my countrymen's heads become turnips when they think they can hold the premises of German unbelief and draw the conclusions of Scottish evangelical orthodoxy?"³¹ Furthermore, this position would seem quite inexcusable when seen in the light of Smith's basic presuppositions in his work, for, "though Smith claimed the authority of the Protestant reformers for his position it is clearly evident that he was profoundly influenced by currents of thought flowing in the wake of the Kantian revolution. Smith's conversion to Neo-Protestant theology was the preparation for, not a consequence of, an acceptance of the correctness of the particular higher critical assertions about the Bible that he was to popularize in Great Britain."³² Nelson is surely correct. Clearly there was not sufficient awareness by many at that time, including those following the MacGregor-Laidlaw line, of the underlying unbelieving principles and presuppositions in Smith's position, and *their* inconsistency with truly Protestant reformed principles.

3. Thirdly, though there is more than an element of truth in the assertion (of Laidlaw and MacGregor) that a non-proven libel or a vote of no-confidence, would (or at least might) have the effect of giving further currency to the views of Smith, it must be observed in retrospect that it seems an inescapable conclusion that this view may indeed be construed as a selling of the cause of truth 'down the river,' for it would give as wide an entrance for such views as may have been wished by the protagonists thereof.³³ Indeed, this was Smith's own reaction to the decision of the 1880 Assembly (which was not substantially different from Laidlaw's motion, as pointed out above) and was used by him as the main thrust of his defence of his subsequent article, "Hebrew Language and Literature."³⁴ (It may be noted here that even the final Assembly decision of 1881, deposing Smith, was considered by many of his friends as a "triumph" for his views!³⁵) However, in all charity it must be pointed out that in the exigencies of the moment this position of Laidlaw and MacGregor must have seemed viable. After all, in the first place the case was unique, as MacGregor himself pointed out;³⁶ secondly, Smith

30 *Aspects of Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh, 1927), pp. 170-171.

31 Quoted in Maclean, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

32 Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

33 Cf. Macleod, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

34 Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-286.

35 Vidler, *op. cit.*, p. 173; Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, pp. 446 ff.

36 *Freedom in the Truth etc.*, p. 21: "But that case, the like of which had not occurred once before in 300 years . . ."

strongly iterated and reiterated his adherence to evangelical truth, including the inspiration of Scripture (though, as pointed out above, it is a moot point whether what he meant by that term corresponded to that which had been understood and defined by the Westminster divines and the Reformed Churches subsequently); and, thirdly, it seems that it was their definite hope (and expectation?) that future investigation would expose the groundlessness of the critical positions and, so to speak, bury them forever. MacGregor himself, with characteristic vigour and polemical 'bite', assails the critical positions in his later works on Apologetics, especially in his *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*,³⁷ in which he takes much the same ground on the Old Testament question as William Henry Green and Geerhardus Vos of Princeton Seminary. In a recent volume, O. T. Allis has pointed out how that there was great optimism amongst conservative scholars at the beginning of the century over the publication of James Orr's *The Problem of the Old Testament* (1906), which, it was hoped, would settle for ever the critical arguments surrounding the Old Testament.³⁸ It need hardly be said that this optimism was in the event not rewarded with realization. It may also be pointed out, that just four years earlier, in 1902, Orr took a similar position to MacGregor in a case before the United Free Church Assembly involving the advanced critical views of Professor George Adam Smith (of the Glasgow U.F. College), another erstwhile pupil of Davidson who had entered the Free Church ministry a year after the conclusion of the Robertson Smith case.³⁹ Whilst at this distance in history one might be inclined to be somewhat cynical over what one may consider 'pious optimism' on the part of these men (Laidlaw, MacGregor and Orr), this must be balanced by the fact that *they* did not possess the historical perspective which later generations have been privileged to possess.

37 Cf.: "The Cambridge Arabic Professor is found to be in his thinking receptive rather than originitive,—taking his philosophy from Herbert Spencer, his social archaeology from J. F. Maclennan, and his biblical criticism from the Continental school represented by Wellhausen. And in the mind so constituted and furnished there are found the same traits of unfitness for veritable criticism (=judgement) as elsewhere are found in that master,—rash arbitrariness in assumptions even as to fact, ignorance or ignoring of information outside of the 'cave' of a one-sided book-learning, and manifested incapacity for simply independent judgement on the ground of relevant evidence" (MacGregor, *Studies in the History etc.*, p. 269; cf. also pp. 279 ff. of that work).

38 *The Old Testament: Its Claims and Critics* (Nutley, N.J., 1972), p. vii; cf. Young, op. cit., p. 139. [The late Professor H. H. Rowley used to relate how, when he entered on his theological studies and was introduced to Pentateuchal criticism, he turned to his spiritual mentors and asked what he should read to counter this dangerous stuff. He was advised to read Orr's *The Problem of the Old Testament*. He did so, and was immediately and permanently convinced of the validity of the documentary hypothesis. Ed.]

The fact is, however, that able theologians and scholars of the calibre of MacGregor and Orr should have discerned that the logical outcome of the basically naturalistic positions espoused by Robertson Smith *et al.* would be modernism . . . and worse (thus Rushdoony⁴⁰).

4. Fourthly, it is scarcely tenable to maintain, as did MacGregor and Laidlaw, that no *doctrine* of the Confession of Faith was impugned by the critical positions. There is a vast dichotomy between the Westminster Confession's doctrine of the Inspiration of Scripture of the *supernatural* origin of the Bible, the Canon of Scripture, etc.⁴¹—and the doctrine of the critics, naturalistic, evolutionary, and modernistic as it was. Far from being “not contradictory”, these positions are really ultimately diametrically opposed. As R. L. Dabney has aptly commented:

No fair man doubts but that the *Confession of the Free Church*, Chap. I., sec. 2, means to assert what Mr. Smith distinctly impugned touching the Old Testament canon. It is no new thing, indeed, in church history, to find the advocates of latitudinarian views raising this false issue.⁴²

Further, as Nelson has said recently:

Smith emphatically rejected . . . propositional revelation, an infallible Bible, and a static system of doctrine.⁴³

Such ‘rejections’ could hardly be imputed to the compilers of the Westminster Confession!

5. Finally, one positive lesson for Reformed theology which may be drawn from the case of Robertson Smith is that it seems undeniable

³⁹ See J. R. Fleming, *The Church in Scotland 1875-1929* (Edinburgh, 1933), p. 59. [When George Adam Smith, not yet ordained, was sent to Aberdeen by the Free Church as a stopgap, to take Robertson Smith's classes until a successor could be appointed, he called on the older man at his lodgings in Crown Street to ask for advice. “What would you do”, demanded Robertson Smith, “if I should refuse to obtemper the decision of the Assembly and insist on taking the class myself?” “Then”, said the stopgap, “I would be proud to go and sit among your students”. (Cf. L. A. Smith, *George Adam Smith*, 1943, p. 19.) ED.]

⁴⁰ “The anthropology he [Freud] went to was ostensibly religious but actually naturalistic, namely, William Robertson Smith's . . . whose works are basic to an understanding of both modernism in the churches and of Freudianism as a psychology” (R. J. Rushdoony, *Freud* (Modern Thinkers Series) [Philadelphia, 1965], p. 21; cf. also p. 24 of that work).

⁴¹ See *Westminster Confession*, Chapter One; cf. John Kennedy, *The Doctrine of Inspiration in the Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh, n.d., repr.), for a contemporary discussion of that matter. See also B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Cherry Hill, N.J., 1972, repr.), especially pp. 261-333 of that work.

⁴² *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (London, 1967, Vol. 1, repr.) p. 401. Cf. Macleod (op. cit., p. 310): “In his later years [Smith] . . . came to see . . . that his attitude to Holy Scripture was quite out of harmony with the Westminster Confession.”

⁴³ Op. cit., p. 99.

ably true, as Smith alleged, that in the Scottish Reformed tradition there was too little scholarly consideration of *biblical theology and exegesis*⁴⁴ and too much of dogmatics, or *systematic theology*. Smith maintained (as Davidson had done before him⁴⁵) that there was an inclination within that tradition to inform one's exegesis by a (pre-supposed) dogmatic system.⁴⁶ It seems difficult to escape the conclusion that Smith, at least in part, was right at this point, and that the Free Church had indeed been too systematic-theology-orientated and too little concerned with matters of exegesis and literary analysis. Indeed, this may to some extent explain why, when the Robertson Smith case came to the forefront, there was general confusion in the Church and an inability to deal conclusively with

⁴⁴ Of course Robertson Smith went far beyond purely biblical exegesis in his work. Even exegesis is influenced by a man's presuppositions and it thus requires to be guided by truly biblical presuppositions. Cf. E. J. Young, *The Study of Old Testament Theology Today* (London, 1958), pp. 24-31.

⁴⁵ A. B. Davidson, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, Vol. 1 (London, 1862), p. vi: "We in this country have been not unaccustomed to begin at the other end, creating Exegesis and Grammar by deduction from Dogmatic, instead of discovering Dogmatic by induction from Grammar" (quoted in Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 87).

⁴⁶ Cf. Nelson, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98.

⁴⁷ See note 7 *supra*, and cf.: "The cluster of propositions maintained by the professor . . . are in their nature not theological, but archaeological. They refer, properly, not to matters of Christian faith, but to matters of biblical antiquity . . . Supposing that the Bible is the divine record of the divine revelation, any further question about the way and manner and purpose of the origination of detailed portions of the record is theologically unimportant" (*Daily Review*, *op. cit.*); "All through the history of his [Smith's] case . . . I constantly took his part, on the view that his critical opinions . . . might be held, sincerely though mistakenly, by one believing, as he professed to believe, the Confessional [Westminster] doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture" (*Studies in the History, etc.*, p. 335). This naturally raises the related question of MacGregor's attitude to clerical subscription of the Westminster Confession. It would seem that he tended to consider subscription as being in essence adherence to a distinct *dogmatic system*, Calvinistic in nature, rather than to the *minutiae* of the Confession's propositions. (Cf. his *Day of Salvation* (Dunedin, 188), p. 72.) This is not to say, however, that he was favourable to 'relaxation' of ordination vows—the *terms* of adherence. On the contrary, he was almost implacably opposed to any such 'modifications'—as is clear from his writings on the subject (see e.g., *Presbyterians on Trial by Their Principles* [Dunedin, 1890]). In the present writer's estimation MacGregor was not sufficiently perceptive of the real divergence between the views of the Westminster Confession, Chapter One, on the one hand, and the critical school on the other, as to the *nature* of biblical inspiration and revelation. As E. J. Young has said: "William Robertson Smith . . . sought to accomplish the impossible task of reconciling the newer views of Wellhausen . . . with the doctrine of inspiration stated in the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith" (*Thy Word is Truth* [London, 1963], p. 194). It would seem clear also that views of the *nature* of the Bible would inevitably inform views of the *content* (i.e. doctrine), as subsequent history has eloquently demonstrated. In this writer's opinion a theologian of the stature of James MacGregor ought to have discerned this.

the matters raised. It may also help to explain why there was a tendency towards a dualistic position—the separation of dogmatics and the work of biblical criticism, that is to say, the assumption that the critical conclusions did not (could not?) subvert the theology (thus MacGregor?⁴⁷)—and also how these critical views gained such apparently easy access into the Church through A. B. Davidson; namely, the Free Church was not insulated from these views by a truly biblical exegetical and (perhaps more important) apologetic *method* to begin with. It is true, however, that there were within the Free Church at that time sound conservative exegetes who dealt in a scholarly manner with the various critical matters raised. Such men as Patrick Fairbairn, George Smeaton and David Brown come to mind, and, to a lesser extent, even James MacGregor (cf. his *Exodus* [2 Parts], Edinburgh, 1889).⁴⁸ Though Fairbairn died before the Smith case, Smeaton and Brown were directly involved in that case, and both sought to persuade Smith to forsake the adverse criticism.⁴⁹ Though unsuccessful in their efforts, these men put the Church of Christ in their debt by their commendable work in seeking to expound the “whole counsel of God” faithfully. May it please the Lord even in our day to raise apologetes who from Christian-theistic presuppositions will likewise expound and defend His truth, as well as ably refute error wherever it may manifest itself, in the confidence of the Apostle (following the Prophet Isaiah):

... all flesh is as grass and the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.⁵⁰

North Cheam, Surrey

⁴⁸ Mention may also be made of the work of Professors G. C. M. Douglas and W. Binnie, and the Rev. A. Moody Stuart, of the Free Church, and Professor J. Robertson and the Rev. W. L. Baxter, of the Established Church, all of whom were able apologetes for the traditional views and scholarly opponents of the critical methods.

⁴⁹ Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201, 225 et seq.

⁵⁰ I Peter 1: 24-25; cf. Isaiah 40: 6, 8.