# 'Fact Not Dogma': George Adam Smith, Evangelicalism and Biblical Criticism

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The story of the rise of higher critical views of the Bible in nineteenth-century Scotland is well-known and has been told often.[1] What are still to be explored are the attempts made during the period to integrate such critical opinions within the prevailing evangelical ethos of the contexts in which they grew, most notably the nineteenth-century Free Church of Scotland.[2] Within the context of the Free Church of Scotland, the events surrounding the suspension and eventual deposition of William Robertson Smith, the brilliant Hebrew Professor in the Free Church College (later Christ's College), Aberdeen, have been subjected to scrutiny in a variety of academic disciplines. But the work of George Adam Smith, who, as Professor of Old Testament at the Free Church (Trinity) College, Glasgow from 1892-1910 was William Robertson Smith's natural successor in Scottish Semitic studies, has gone largely unnoticed.[3]

George Adam Smith's first major contribution to scholarship was a two-volume commentary on Isaiah, published in the Expositor's Bible series (under the editorship of W. Robertson Nicoll) in 1888 and 1892. These works grew out of a series of sermons preached at Queen's Cross Church in Aberdeen, Smith's first (and only) pastoral charge.[4] Smith's

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1 For an overview of this subject, see A.C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk* (Edinburgh, 1983) and his *Studies in Church History* (Edinburgh, 1999), especially chapter 6.

2 The most scholarly work to date dealing with this theme has been Richard A. Riesen *Criticism and Faith in Late Victorian Scotland* (Lanham, 1985).

3 Riesen's work does deal at length with George Adam Smith and his concept of 'believing criticism'. Apart from a memoir written by Smith's widow after his death, no detailed study has yet been made of his life and work.

4 Smith was, successively, replacement tutor for William Robertson Smith in the Free Church College, Aberdeen, from 1880-82, first minister of Queen's Cross Church Free Church, Aberdeen from 1882-92, Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at the Free Church College, Glasgow, from 1892-1910, and Principal of Aberdeen University from 1910-35.

exposition of Isaiah betrays the influence of his New College teacher, A.B. Davidson, whom Smith described as 'the real author of the greatest theological change that had come over Scotland for centuries'.[5] The change to which Smith refers is particularly the insights of biblical criticism into the life and ministry of the Old Testament prophets. In a rare piece of personal testimony, Smith recalls a rubicon-crossing moment in Davidson's classroom:

> One morning – I at least date from that day my awakening to the reality of the prophets – he said 'The prophet always spoke first to his own time'. They had 'times', then! From the illimitable futures over which, as we had been taught, the prophet's word roved in search of its vague end, from the interminable doctrinal controversies about the fulfilment of prophecy, our thoughts were drawn in to a definite bit of real life.[6]

In all his subsequent work on the prophets (Smith wrote a further two volumes on the minor prophets in the same series, published in 1896 and 1897, as well as a volume of lectures on Jeremiah in 1923), Smith applied this principle of critical investigation. What were the times to which the prophets spoke? What were the circumstances that gave birth to their ministries? And how do these help us to understand the form in which the prophetic writings have come to us? Criticism, in such a context, Smith argues, is a necessary corollary of evangelical belief, and in particular, of belief in the Bible as the word of God. 'The critic,' he says, 'is but the patient student of Scripture, searching for the testimony of the sacred text about itself, and formulating that.'[7] Far, therefore, from undermining the witness of the Bible to Christ, criticism affords the best method of evangelical interpretation of the biblical text. In this way Smith sought to integrate evangelical faith with critical science.

Recently, however, the idea that this is possible has received sustained attack both from evangelical and non-evangelical sources. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, formerly Dean of Students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and prefiously warden of Rutherford House, Edinburgh, has written that Robertson Smith and his colleagues

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5 George Adam Smith, 'Professor A.B. Davidson' in *The Union Magazine*, March 1902, p. 111.

6 George Adam Smith, 'Professor A.B. Davidson, in *The Union Magazine*, April 1902, p. 162.

7 George Adam Smith, *Isaiah*, Vol. 2 (London, 1895), p. 22.

> leave the relation of critical, historical study and the unique, supernatural, revelatory nature of Scripture unresolved. In place of developing an integrated conception of critical study in the context of faith, they are satisfied to practise a dualistic compromise.[8]

This thesis is akin to that of Richard Riesen in his work on the Free Church fathers. According to Riesen, men like William Cunningham and Thomas Chalmers accepted the authority of the Bible but then raised questions for which they had no adequate answers, and they thereby anticipated the rise of criticism in the Free Church.[9] Spirituality, Riesen argues, forced upon them a high and reverent attitude to Scripture, while rationality required that they ask hard questions. For them the Bible had to be read both as no other book, and also as any other book. Cameron's assessment of Robertson Smith (and by implication, George Adam Smith) is similar. His argument is that *believing* criticism is a non-sequitur. Scottish nineteenth-century theology, in his view, represents the relationship between faith and criticism as an either/or, not a both/and.

A more refined version of this view has been published by Mark A. Noll, Professor of Church History at Wheaton College, Illinois, who suggests that the meaning of the term 'criticism' itself is at the nub of the issue. Despite the protestations of Robertson Smith and others that criticism could be pursued as an exercise of faith, Noll argues that

> In Britain during these years a certain ambiguity clung to terms like 'criticism'. It applied both to scholarly inquiry in itself and to the results of scholarship predicated on the new historical consciousness. In addition, a certain naiveté still attended the supposed ability to work on such issues with strict academic detachment.[10]

In Noll's view, scholars such as George Adam Smith could apply criticism evangelically not because of a dualistic view of criticism and faith, but because of a dualistic notion of criticism itself. If compromised by evangelical presuppositions, scholarly interpretation of Scripture could

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8 N.M. de S. Cameron, *Biblical Higher Criticism and the Defense of Infallibilism in Nineteenth Century Britain* (New York, 1987), p. 269.

9 See, for example, R.A. Riesen, 'Higher Criticism in the Free Church Fathers', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* XX (1980), pp. 119-42. For a different perspective see Nicholas R. Needham, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture in the Free Church Fathers* (Edinburgh, 1991).

10 Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible* (Leicester, 1976), p. 71.

never be completely objective; on the other hand, the more liberal theologians could exercise academic detachment, it is argued, because they approached the text of Scripture with no such presuppositional attitude.

Another approach is the radical one presented by Alistair G. Hunter of Glasgow University at a recent (1995) conference on William Robertson Smith. Hunter's thesis is that it simply is not possible to be both an evangelical and a critic, in spite of the Smiths' assertions to the contrary. The conclusions of criticism are so hostile and inimical to the presuppositions of evangelicalism that no reconciliation is possible:

> Higher criticism and traditional doctrine are not in ready harmony. Until the churches recognise this uncomfortable fact, they will be condemned to an involuntary support of those Free Church doctrines of inspiration and authority which William Robertson Smith and George Adam Smith endorsed whole-heartedly.... The church today loses out to the conservatives because of its evident pusillanimity, its craven refusal to ask serious questions.[11]

On this basis, Hunter can speak of Smith as a man 'whose devotion to evangelical religion regardless of his critical scholarship won him friends across the theological spectrum'.[12]

On Cameron's view, therefore, George Adam Smith lived comfortably with evangelicalism and criticism because he held the two in parallel, although they never intersected. In Noll's thesis, he could do it because criticism meant for him, and evangelicals like him, a scholarly, but not wholly objective, approach to Scripture. In Hunter's view, he holds his evangelicalism only by disregarding his critical insights. From each of these theses a different George Adam Smith emerges. In the first he is dualistic. In the second he is naive. In the third he is a coward.

It is doubtful whether Smith would have recognised himself in any of these caricatures. It was his contention, not only that his faith and his critical views cohered but that they supported one another. Riesen's work on Davidson and the two Smiths concludes that 'it was George Adam Smith, by all accounts the least theological of the three, who came closest to a kind of consistency between his faith and his criticism'.[13]

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[11] A.G. Hunter, 'The Indemnity: William Robertson Smith and George Adam Smith', in W. Johnstone (ed.), *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment* (Sheffield, 1995), p. 65.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[13] Riesen. R.A., 'Faith and Criticism in Post-Disruption Scotland, with particular reference to A.B. Davidson, W.R. Smith and G.A. Smith', Ph.D.

Even at this, however, Riesen qualifies his assessment by suggesting that 'It is not so much that he had worked out the theological interconnections as that his view of the Bible and his view of faith seemed to require less conciliation'.[14] Riesen's thesis is that as a preacher, George Adam Smith was more concerned to employ criticism to cast light for men on the meaning of Scripture than to pursue scientific criticism for its own sake. Arguably, that is precisely what made Smith an 'evangelical' critic – the fact that he regarded criticism as introductory, and not terminal; it was the first question, but not the last. Critical evaluations of the Old Testament were, in his view, preachable, and not simply the preserve of aimless scholarship. They served the purpose of the evangel.

The question is still pertinent, therefore, for Scottish theology and scholarship, a hundred years after Smith. Does an espousal of critical views of the Bible undercut or underpin evangelicalism? Can one be a believing critic without being open to the charge either of duplicity, naiveté or cowardice?

This article will examine this question with reference to George Adam Smith, by looking, first, at his evangelical inheritance, secondly at his critical approach to Scripture, and thirdly at his own methodology for achieving a synthesis, or at least a working relationship, between faith and criticism.

## George Adam Smith's Evangelicalism

Part of Smith's apologetic for the role of criticism within the church was the fact that 'In this country at the present day nearly every leader in Old Testament criticism... is a believer in evangelical Christianity.'[15]

This meant an affirming on their part of 'the truths which must be the strength of all Christian preaching. The sovereign grace of God to sinful men, the Divinity of our Lord, His atoning death and resurrection, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church – these are held and held heartily by critics among us, the most learned, the most sane, the most free, the most advanced.'[16] The affirmation of these distinctly evangelical elements appears at various points throughout Smith's writings, both published and unpublished. Some of his letters reveal an extremely robust evangelicalism. To his brother-in-law, David Ross, he wrote in 1883:

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thesis, Edinburgh, 1981, p. 471.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] George Adam Smith, *The Preaching of the Old Testament to the Age* (London, 1893), p. 33.

[16] *Idem.*

> ...of course you can always say the atonement was a fact. It really took place – this sacrifice for sins, if we are to believe the Bible. So that I suspect it is new to most people, and so you can come down on them with the message of it. Thunder it out in big letters – 'not a dogma but a FACT!'[17]

Such aggressive evangelicalism was the legacy of three relationships which involved Smith in his formative years.

## Smith and his Father

The first was with his father, George Smith, with whom he was extraordinarily close. The closeness was unique if only because, for the formative period of Smith's childhood and adolescence they were in different continents. Smith's father had gone from Scotland to India in 1853 to work in a private school there. Eventually he became co-proprietor and editor of *The Friend of India* newspaper. Although strictly speaking a layman, he was to describe himself as 'having a personal interest in the missionaries of the Free Church of Scotland'.[18] Indeed, George Smith saw his educational work in India as a valid and necessary means of mission work in Calcutta. Later he would return to Scotland, holding a strategic post as Secretary to the Foreign Missions Board of the Free (and later the United Free) Church of Scotland.

For most of George Adam Smith's childhood, however, his father was absent. For his health and safety, the child born to George and Janet Smith in Calcutta in 1856 was brought home to Scotland in 1859 to be brought up by two aunts in Leith. Smith senior did not return to Scotland permanently until 1875.

Despite the physical absence, however, George Adam Smith and his father kept in touch regularly by letter. The correspondence developed and deepened over the years so that there was fostered an intimate relationship more akin to friendship than to parental kinship. His father, on his part, sprinkled his correspondence with frequent evangelical references to the need for a relationship with God's Son on the part of his own son: in 1866 he writes: 'you are now old enough to understand me when I ask you if

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[17] George Adam Smith to David Ross, 1883 (no date), National Library of Scotland (NLS), Acc. 9446, No. 6.

[18] George Smith, 'Half a century's growth of Protestant Missions in India', *The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland*, No. 25 (January 1903), p. 8.

you feel that you love Jesus Christ...'[19] and three years later: 'It is my daily prayer that you and you all may be Christ's'.[20]

In his turn, George Adam Smith wrote to his father of life at home, of his developing interests and of his studies. After graduating in Arts at Edinburgh in 1875, when his father came to live in Scotland, the family were together for the first time.[21] Smith entered New College from 1875 to 1878, studying in Leipzig and Tübingen during his course, and visiting Egypt and Palestine. His travels in the Orient were to develop into a deep interest in Palestine, and his *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* was to be among his lasting achievements and contributions to Scottish theology and enquiry. His commitment to academic excellence was marked by the awarding of several honorary degrees from both sides of the Atlantic, and his being made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1916, his moderatorial year and the year in which he received a knighthood.

However, on the threshold of his ministerial career in 1880, Smith was unsure which way to turn. He did not wish to take up a full ministerial charge in Scotland, and the possibility of being a replacement tutor in Hebrew language during Robertson Smith's suspension from Aberdeen College appealed to him. Two assistantships were offered him from Scotland, and eventually he accepted the post as assistant to the Revd John Fraser of Brechin West Free Church, where he served from June to November 1880 before being appointed to the tutorship in Aberdeen. He served in this post over the two sessions 1880-82.

Smith's correspondence with his father in 1880 reveals his agitated and uncertain state of mind regarding his own career. One interesting aspect is his willingness to consider foreign missionary work. 'Of course,' he wrote to his mother, 'I would go to no place but India if I went at all. Don't let any one know that I am even thinking of it.'[22] To his father he confided that 'Foreign Missions... have a great attraction for me, an attraction that has grown the more I have seen of missions here [in Egypt]. But I am

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19 George Smith to George Adam Smith, 6 January 1866, NLS, Acc. 9446, No. 3.

20 George Smith to George Adam Smith, July 1869, NLS, Acc. 9446, No. 3.

21 George and Janet Smith had had eleven children, one of whom had died in infancy. Most had been brought to Scotland in their young days and were cared for by their aunts in Leith, whose interest in their young wards was as good and as wholesome as that of any parent.

22 George Adam Smith to mother from Cairo, 17 March 1880, NLS Acc. 9446, No. 16.

willing and indeed must leave the question open to prayer till I return.'[23] Similarly, he speaks of the possibility of working in Scotland. Of this possibility he says to his father, 'if I am to be at home I should like to be where there is some work to be done among our home heathen. I hate the prospect of returning to a big congregation.'[24]

This correspondence with his father, therefore, reveals a mind predisposed to the claims and aims of evangelicalism, and a heart interested in the work, whether at home or abroad, of evangelism. What Smith knew of his father's work in India, as well as the little exposure he himself received of mission work, kindled within him a desire to see the Gospel spread and to see many lives influenced by it.

## Smith and Henry Drummond

Second, there was his relationship with Henry Drummond, whose biography Smith would eventually write. Slightly older than Smith, Drummond's later work would be to engage in synthesising Darwinian evolution with biblical Christianity. He became Professor of Natural Science at the Free Church College in Glasgow from 1884-94, where he was for a little time a colleague of Smith's.

Drummond worked extensively with Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey when they came to Scotland in 1873 with their American-style evangelism and revivalism. Smith writes enthusiastically of the Moody and Sankey campaign, claiming that it helped 'to pour fresh power into the routine of Christian work'.[25] Of Moody's preaching, Smith claimed that 'His gospel, which had its centre in the Atonement, was the gospel of an Incarnate Saviour.'[26] Following the campaign, Drummond preached extensively in different parts of the country, as an itinerant evangelist whose preaching, says Smith

> ranged over all the great doctrines and facts of Christianity: Sin and Salvation, Penitence, the Atonement, Regeneration, Conversion, Sanctification, the Power of the Spirit, Christ's Teaching about Himself and about a Future Life.... He stuck close to the Bible.... His theology was practically that of the leaders of the movement; and among crowds who were always more or less ready to mark the slightest defection from

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23 George Adam Smith to father from Cairo, 15 March 1880, NLS Acc. 9446, No. 16.

24 *Idem.*

25 George Adam Smith, *The Life of Henry Drummond* (London, 1898), p. 56.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

> orthodoxy, there appears never to have arisen any suspicion of a difference between his teaching and the teaching of the authorities.[27]

All this Smith quotes and recalls with great approval, especially commending Drummond for seeking 'to win the reason of men for religion'.[28] He began, says Smith, with 'the presentation of facts', and 'the unfolding of laws', not attempting to rouse men's emotions or affections without presenting them first with the concrete facts of the Evangel. When Drummond died in March 1897, Smith, who was Clerk of the Senate at Trinity College Glasgow, penned the following tribute in the Minutes of the Senate:

> [Drummond] was the living embodiment of what many a thoughtful Christian in this age seems to be seeking for with almost passionate earnestness – a Christianity which has for its roots to know the personal God and Father, revealing himself sympathetically to the personal soul.[29]

Writing his biography the following year, Smith described Drummond as 'a young man, trained in an evangelical family and in the school of the older orthodoxy, who consecrated his youth to the service of Christ, and never all his life lost his faith in Christ as his Lord and Saviour, or in Christ's Divinity or in the power of His Atonement; but who grew away from many of the doctrines which when he was young were still regarded by the Churches as equally well assured and indispensable to the creed of a Christian: such as, for instance, belief in the literal inspiration and equal divinity of all parts of the Bible'.[30] This statement sheds light as much on Smith's evangelicalism as on Drummond's. Smith could state with approval that Drummond had advanced, in line with critical thinking, on the older, dogmatic views of the Church on the nature of the Bible, while at the same time never jettisoning the facts of revelation as they centred

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27 *Ibid.*, p. 94. It is, perhaps, worth noting that Smith wrote this in defence of Drummond, whose orthodoxy, as Smith hints in the passage, was not always acknowledged. As David Bebbington has recently argued, Drummond re-formulated many favourite evangelical emphases, wishing 'to remain within the evangelical movement, if necessary by stretching its boundaries' ('Henry Drummond, evangelicalism and science', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 28 (1998), p. 131.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

29 Trinity College Senate Minutes 12 March 1897, Archives of Trinity College, DC84, 1/1.

30 Smith, *The Life of Henry Drummond*, pp. 13-14.

upon Jesus Christ, both in his Person and Work, as the fundamental elements of the Evangel.

## Smith and William Robertson Smith

A third relationship which was of importance for Smith's evangelicalism, was, ironically perhaps, that with William Robertson Smith. As a Free Church divinity student of the 1870s, George Adam Smith was acutely aware of the ecclesiastical controversies of the time, and in particular the controversies over Robertson Smith. If A.B. Davidson was the proponent of the new critical attitude to the Bible in Scotland, Robertson Smith was the propagator of it, taking as his basic assumption that

> The higher criticism does not mean negative criticism. It means the fair and honest looking at the Bible as a historical record, and the effort everywhere to reach the real meaning and historical setting... of the Scripture records as a whole.... This process can be dangerous to faith only when it is begun without faith – when we forget that the Bible history is no profane history, but the story of God's saving self-manifestation.[31]

Robertson Smith argued that his attitude to the Bible was of a piece with that of the Reformers, who 'had got a new way of looking at the Bible, a way that enabled them to find in Scripture a living and powerful Gospel'.[32] This was unlike the earlier allegorical approaches to Scripture which had done nothing either for the Gospel or for the church; both evangelistically and ecclesiastically the allegorical interpretation of the Bible meant that it was

> impossible to interpret Scripture rightly so long as men sought in it for what it did not contain – for a system of abstract intellectual truth instead of a Divine history of God's workings among mankind, and in men's hearts, to set up on earth the kingdom of heaven.[33]

George Adam Smith traces the influences of this approach in Scotland through A.B. Davidson and through Robertson Smith. Davidson he

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[31] William Robertson Smith 'What History Teaches us to seek in the Bible', in *Lectures and Essays* ed. J.S. Black and G. Chrystal, (London, 1912), p. 233.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 214.

describes as 'one man against an ancient and an honoured system',[34] who drove his students 'to read all we could find in the historical conditions of the periods in question'.[35] Smith describes Henry Drummond as a man with a 'keen sense for facts', whose learning 'engaged his sympathies for the great movement which was now rising in Scotland under the hands of Professor Robertson Smith'.[36]

Less well known is Smith's personal acquaintance with Robertson Smith himself. Whatever opportunities the two Smiths had to meet while George Adam Smith was a divinity student, an interesting encounter between them took place miles away from the scene of ecclesiastical controversy. In December 1879, George Adam Smith was visiting Egypt, which he eventually reached after a long and wearisome voyage. As he stepped off the SS Canara in Port Said, Robertson Smith came aboard. Smith's correspondence takes up the story:

> What was my surprise to see Robertson Smith step on board the 'Canara' and take possession of the bunk I had just vacated. He was on his way to Jedda, and thence to Aden to go to the interior of Arabia.... I had time to have a chat with him.... He spoke freely of his case, but I had not better repeat all he said.[37]

Their conversation focused upon the controversies at home, Robertson Smith's sense of outrage at the behaviour of Principal Rainy, from whom he was becoming increasingly estranged, and his resigning himself to the inevitable outcome of the controversies. On his return home, he and George Adam Smith again had the opportunity to meet, at a time of importance and difficulty for Smith, on the threshold of his ministerial career, as he weighed up in his own mind the possibilities before him. The

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34 George Adam Smith, 'A.B. Davidson', The Union Magazine, May 1902, p. 205.

35 George Adam Smith, 'A.B. Davidson', The Union Magazine, April 1902, p. 162.

36 Smith, *The Life of Henry Drummond*, p. 107.

37 George Adam Smith to his mother from Cairo, 21 December 1879, NLS, Acc. 9446, No. 16. J.S. Black and G. Chrystal, Robertson Smith's biographers, set this in context thus: 'Smith left London for Egypt on November 5, 1879, and spent the next six months abroad, returning to England on May 4, 1880, greatly invigorated in health, and bringing back with him a rich accumulation of observations and experiences that greatly influenced all his subsequent thinking and writing' (*The Life of William Robertson Smith*, p. 333).

following observation on the part of George Adam Smith is of interest for our present purposes:

> I have had a talk with Smith, which confirms my fears as to the temper of next Assembly. He spoke very strongly against Rainy.... He is evidently not disposed to receive a rebuke.... *On the other hand I have been surprised with Smith's aggressive Evangelicalism. I wish everybody could know the missionary work he did in Arabia distributing Bibles etc.*[38]

'Aggressive evangelicalism' is not something one would normally associate with William Robertson Smith, yet George Adam Smith saw it for himself, and was affected by what he saw. In Robertson Smith he found a confidant, one with whom, in somewhat unusual circumstances, he could discuss the church crises in Scotland which were to be so significant for both of them. But he also saw a living, powerful and practical evangelical faith. As the Moody and Sankey campaign had given impetus to the practical use of the Bible, so Robertson Smith and others had encouraged the critical study of it. According to George Adam Smith, the trial of Robertson Smith

> was not so much the trial of one man... nor even the trial of one set of opinions, as the education of the whole Church in face of the facts which Biblical Criticism had recently presented to her.[39]

Such criticism was not inimical to faith; indeed, it was defended 'on the highest grounds of faith in God and loyalty to Christ'.[40] George Adam Smith not only believed this, but had seen it in action in the evangelicalism of the critics of whom he spoke with the highest regard. He entered into critical studies himself as a believer in the concept of criticism as a service to Christ, and the uncovering of biblical facts and biblical history a corollary to evangelistic endeavour.

## George Adam Smith's Views on Biblical Criticism

Smith's mature reflection on the nature of biblical criticism is to be found in his *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament,* a series of lectures delivered under the auspices of the Lyman Beecher Foundation at

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38 George Adam Smith to his father from Cairo, 7 April 1880, NLS, Acc. 9446, No. 16. Emphasis added.

39 Smith, *The Life of Henry Drummond*, p. 129.

40 *Idem.*

Yale in 1899. Smith's visit to Yale was significant, among other things, for bringing together D.L. Moody and Smith, 'conservatism and higher criticism' who brought 'from the same platform the message of Christ to Yale'.[41] The subsequent publication of the lectures formed the basis of attempts by the more conservative party within the United Free Church to have Smith (unsuccessfully) tried for heresy at the United Free Church General Assembly of 1902.

However, in his previously published work, Smith had expressed his debt to critical scholarship generally and to critical conclusions about the prophets in particular. His commentaries on Isaiah build upon the premise that the unity of the Book is editorial, the first half predicting events that have clearly occurred in the second. Further, in dealing with chapters 1-39 he does not follow the canonical, but the chronological order of the chapters. This is an attempt to set the chapters within their historical context – their 'times' – for in Smith's opinion, 'No book of the Bible is less susceptible of treatment apart from the history out of which it sprang than the Book of Isaiah.'[42] In a sense this is to echo what Smith understands to have been Isaiah's purpose in his own day – to turn the people to a greater appreciation of the workings of God in history. In attacking vain religious formalism, Smith argues, Isaiah had but one remedy: 'It is a new edition of his old gospel, that God speaks to us in facts, not forms.'[43] Critical thinking on Isaiah has been overtaken by Bernhard Duhm's school of thought regarding a third Isaiah, and by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which have thrown up textual questions unknown to Smith; but as an exegete of Isaiah his primary concern is to apply critical ideas in order to recover the historical situation – the facts – of the prophetic discourse. Similarly, his interpretation of the Cyrus oracles in deutero-Isaiah, and the apparent exilic nature of the later chapters colour his exegesis throughout. That Smith's commentaries popularised the current critical views on Isaiah was acknowledged by as conservative a scholar as O.T. Allis, who took issue in his *The Unity of Isaiah* with many of Smith's conclusions, yet conceded that he

> probably did more to gain a hearing for, and to secure wide acceptance of multiple-authorship of Isaiah among English-speaking readers than any other single book.[44]

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41 Reynolds, J.B. *et. al* (eds.), *Two Centuries of Christian Activity at Yale* (Yale, 1901), p. 111.

42 G.A. Smith, *Isaiah*, Vol. 1, (London, 1888), p. ix.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

44 O.T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 15.

Having visited Palestine twice (in 1880 and 1891), Smith was in a position to publish his magnum opus in 1894, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land.* Despite Naomi Shepherd's assertion that 'the passion for the biblical geography of Palestine... was already on the wane by the 1880s',[45] Smith's work was a major contribution to the study of historical context. Quite apart from the exquisite and readable nature of his prose style, Smith's work was important not least because of its deference to biblical criticism. In the preface to the first edition he wrote:

> We have had too many instances of the embarrassment and confusion into which archaeology and geography lead us, apart from the new methods of Biblical criticism.... In this volume I have felt forced by geographical evidence to contest some of the textual and historical conclusions of recent critics, both in this country and in Germany, but I have fully accepted the critical methods, and I believe this to be the first geography of the Holy Land in which they are employed.[46]

The insights of criticism, as far as geographical context was concerned, were valuable for the establishing of the facts of the biblical narrative. Although he concedes that many people 'habitually exaggerate the evidential value of the geography and archaeology of Palestine',[47] nonetheless questions of geography confirm and support, in Smith's view, critical insights, such as 'in the analysis of the composite books of the Old Testament into their various documents'[48] and the story of the religion of Israel, in 'its origin and development,... the appearance of monotheism, and... the question of the supernatural'.[49]

Smith's inaugural lecture as Professor of Old Testament Language, Literature and Theology, *The Preaching of the Old Testament to the Age,* was a passionate apologetic for the necessity of criticism. He emphatically denied that criticism was rationalism, for rationalism had 'emptied the Christian pulpit of faith and fire'.[50] Criticism, on the other hand, had both affirmed and confirmed the truths which constituted evangelical

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45 N. Shepherd, *The Zealous Intruders* (London, 1987), p. 198.

46 George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, preface to the first edition (London, 1894).

47 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 109-10.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

50 George Adam Smith, *The Preaching of the Old Testament to the Age*, (London, 1893), p. 33.

Christianity, and had made the Old Testament in particular 'habitable by modern men'.[51]

This he develops further in his important work *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*. For Smith, the supreme sanction of the Old Testament is that which it receives from Christ himself. But he argues that 'while we look to Christ as the chief Authority for our Old Testament, we must never forget that He was also its first Critic'.[52] He therefore sees criticism of the Bible as an evangelical task in itself, and not simply as a means to an evangelical end. To look at the Bible critically is to follow Christ's example. The appeal to Christ – the *Christus Comprobatur* – is fundamental; in his lecture on 'the spirit of Christ in the Old Testament' he argues that allegorical interpretation does an injustice to the divine revelation in the historical development of Israel's religion, in which the presence of Christ is made manifest 'upon historical and ethical lines'.[53] To sense this requires an appreciation of the facts of historical development in order that the revelation of God in the Old Testament will be felt by those who would wish to preach it. So he counsels his readers:

> Do not believe that the end of an accurate study of the Hebrew language is simply familiarity with a number of grammatical forms more or less obscure. Painstaking students are otherwise rewarded. It is they who lay their hands on the prophet's heart and feel it beat; it is they who across the ages see the very features on his face as he calls; it is they into whom his style and his music pass.'[54]

Smith's second lecture ends with the confident assertion that 'modern criticism has won its war against the Traditional Theories. It only remains to fix the amount of the indemnity.'[55] The war metaphor and the triumphalism of the assertion annoyed Robert Rainy, who said, 'I know nothing of indemnity. When I see evidence for facts, they are God's facts.'[56] For Rainy, it was enough that facts were established. To that extent he was willing to allow critical enquiry to continue. But for Smith,

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51 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

52 George Adam Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament* (London, 1901), p. 11.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

56 P. Carnegie Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy* (London, 1909), Vol. 2, p. 273.

it was not criticism that was at stake, but the evangel itself. As Kenneth Ross summarises

> Parts, at least, of the old orthodoxy were regarded by the New Evangelists as hostile and alien elements which they were called to uproot.... When they turned their guns on the old orthodoxy, it was holy warfare in which they were engaged.[57]

## George Adam Smith: Believing Critic?

In Smith's thought, two streams converge: a strong evangelical tradition, moulded and fashioned in the context of close personal relationships and church life, and a strong emphasis on approaching Scripture critically, with a view to recreating the historical context in which the religion of Israel developed. But were these held in tension? Or was a synthesis really possible?

An answer to this question has to concentrate upon the wedge which Smith drives between what is *factual* as distinct from what was *dogmatic*. For Smith, Scripture is to be believed because of the facts of the biblical narrative. *The British Weekly* newspaper commended his volumes on Isaiah because

> Mr. Smith has learned to read the religion of Israel through their history; he has learned this in the free school of scientific study of the Old Testament, and he has done more than all his teachers to make this study popular and trusted. Criticism in Mr. Smith's hands appears not as the axe which breaks down the carved work of the Temple, but as the fine tool which clears away the incrustation of centuries, and lays bare the original design. In this most recent expositor's hands, 'the evangelical prophet' remains as evangelical as ever.[58]

The Gospel, in his view, was built upon a basis of historical fact, and must be read as such. 'Not dogma, but fact'. Only because the Old Testament could be read 'not as the dogmas of a Church, but as the living experience of a great people and its greatest individuals'[59] could an evangelical faith be possible. In Smith's view, an entrenched dogmatism which closed the door to objective enquiry failed to do justice to the

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[57] Kenneth R. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland: the Free Church Case 1900-1904 and its Origins*, (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 170-71.

[58] Quoted in *Testimonials in favour of the Rev. George Adam Smith MA* (1892), NLS, Acc. 9446, No. 322, p. 13.

[59] *The Life of Henry Drummond*, p. 105.

literature of Scripture. On the other hand, a free and scientific enquiry established *facts*, without which Scripture could have no meaning or purpose.

When Smith talks of facts, however, he is talking of a view both of history and Scripture which accords with the Wellhausen hypothesis of the development of Israel's religion. Unlike some conservative scholars who believed that Wellhausen's views 'sought only a secular, nonrevelatory model of Israel's history',[60] Smith believed that the evidence for the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch and a developmental theory of Israel's history was so clearly demonstrated by the co-ordinate and unified findings of the higher critics as to be conclusive.[61] The facts, therefore, which are to Smith of greater significance than dogma are the facts as interpreted by the Wellhausian school.

In spite of his insistence on a critical approach to the Old Testament, there are questions criticism cannot answer. Regarding Isaiah 24, for example, Smith concedes that 'Criticism affords little help. It cannot clearly identify the chapter with any historical situation.'[62] This is no barrier to interpretation, however, Smith argues, where the chapter has a universal application. The historical vision of the prophet blooms into an apocalyptic vision; sin is the cause of a nation's ruin, but 'The grace of God affects even the material results of sin; the Divine pardon that converts the sinner converts his circumstances also; Christ Jesus sanctifies even the flesh, and is the Physician of the body as well as the Saviour of the soul.'[63]

Reviewing a working life of dealing both with the insights of criticism and the nature of biblical theology, Smith offered the following personal testimony:

> Modern criticism has cleared up the confusion of the prophetic and legal elements in the Old Testament. It has helped us to separate dead tradition from living truth, and to feel a Spirit not their own working through and upon the ancestral institutions and practices of Israel.... I speak now upon over forty-five years' experience of the influence of modern criticism upon my faith, and I say that this movement, whatever individual aberrations within it may have been, has only confirmed and cleared up my belief that

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60 R.E. Clements 'Julius Wellhausen' in D.K. McKim, *Handbook of Biblical Interpreters* (Leicester, 1998) p. 383.

61 See, for example, his *Modern Preaching of the Old Testament*, pp. 39-41.

62 *Isaiah*, Vol. 1, p. 416.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 426.

> the Old Testament contains a genuine Revelation of God and of His will for mankind.[64]

Yet this is precisely the difficulty. Why should the discovery of facts preclude the emergence of dogma? Indeed, if facts emerge, theories based upon them are bound to arise. It was a given of Smith's age, however, an age in which credal precision paid the price for critical insight, that 'fact, not dogma' was to be regarded as the nostrum of evangelicalism. Yet the question is not answered why the revelation of God and his will in the Old Testament cannot also be an article of credal belief. The glaring omission, therefore, in Smith's work, is not the lack of a harmony between fact and dogma, but the absence of an apologetic for introducing the distinction in the first place.

Smith saw himself not as an evangelical *and* a critic, holding these two in tandem, nor as an evangelical *regardless of* criticism, but as an evangelical *because a* critic, and a critic *because an* evangelical. Criticism he regarded as an evangelical task serving an evangelical and evangelistic end, making the Bible preachable, and focusing the attention of men more upon the historical facts of revelation than the dogmatic assertions of a creed. It was his preoccupation with *fact* which afforded him the opportunity to synthesise both his faith and his critical views of Scripture. While it will not be possible for evangelicals fully to work within the parameters of contemporary critical exposition of the Bible, there is a valuable lesson here nonetheless. What George Adam Smith could not accept was the thought that objective scholarship was necessarily inimical to faith. And to the extent that behind our credal formulation must be an understanding of God's self-disclosure based on sound historico-grammatical exegesis, we cannot accept it either.

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[64] George Adam Smith, *The Teaching of the Old Testament in Schools*, (London, 1923), p. 4.