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# Professor James MacGregor and the Case of William Robertson Smith\*

JOHN W. KEDDIE

## Introduction

Professor Thomas Smout in his *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* highlights events in the Victorian period in Scotland which attracted widespread attention. He pinpoints the Disruption in the Church of Scotland in 1843 as one of these. From that “Disruption” a significant number of ministers and people went out of the Established Church to form the Church of Scotland, Free. He goes on to say that “scarcely less marked was public interest in the trial of Robertson Smith for heresy by the Free Church in 1881”.<sup>1</sup> The irony of the situation is that both these events involved the Free Church of Scotland, a denomination which was initially acknowledged for its strong evangelical and orthodox position. The rise of the critical movement in Biblical studies within its bounds indicated a serious shift in the position of the Church in respect of adherence to the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture. That critical movement heralded a terrible declension and downgrade in the credibility and power of the Church in the land. It is only fair to say that those who initially embraced the critical positions in the Scottish Church

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<sup>1</sup> T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950*, London 1987, 181-182. In point of fact the conclusion of the “Robertson Smith Case” was not a trial for heresy as there was no “libel” pursued in the General Assembly in 1881. Smith was simply removed from his professorial chair that year essentially on grounds of expediency.

believed there was no inconsistency between those positions and traditional evangelical faith. The truth was that it was an indicator of a loss of evangelical faith, based as it had always been on a high view of the inspiration, authority and historical accuracy of the Bible. After the critics had done their work it was clear that in the popular perception the basis of Christian faith in an infallible record had been dealt a mortal blow. The significance of the case of William Robertson Smith before the courts of the Free Church between 1876 and 1881 cannot be overestimated.

### **Professor MacGregor**

In this article we will examine the position of James MacGregor (1830-1894), the Professor of Systematic Theology in New College Edinburgh. MacGregor had been in that position since 1868, having previously been Free Church minister in Barry (1857-1861) and Paisley (1861-1868). His reputation as an orthodox Calvinistic theologian in the old-school mode was largely gained by a brilliant book on *Christian Doctrine* first produced in 1861<sup>2</sup> and a substantial volume on *The Sabbath Question* five years later.<sup>3</sup> The volume on doctrine has in more recent times been described fairly as “a skilful popularisation of Calvinist theology”.<sup>4</sup> Of the *Sabbath Question* Principal John Macleod wrote that it was “another work worthy of the traditions of Scottish Theology”. He described it as “conclusive in argument, vigorous in style, and it has in it a bite that is almost the hallmark of that streak of genius which is found in the author’s work”.<sup>5</sup> MacGregor, then, was no mean theologian. But what would he make of the issues involving the Old Testament criticism propounded by his erstwhile pupil, William Robertson Smith? If MacGregor had a bit of the genius about him, he also had a bit of the erratic. This is something that came out in his odd position on the matters raised by Smith.

### **How it all began**

On 7th December 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

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<sup>2</sup> Edinburgh, 1861, vii+164pp. By 1874 this book had reached 12,000 copies in circulation.

<sup>3</sup> Edinburgh, 1866, xii+433pp.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Breward, “MacGregor, James 1829-1894”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 16th December 2003.

<sup>5</sup> John Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, Edinburgh, 1946, 302.

College, Aberdeen, William Robertson Smith, then a young man of twenty-nine. On 3rd March 1876, alluding to some criticisms of the article which had come to his ears, Professor James MacGregor, of New College, Edinburgh, 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."<sup>6</sup>

The attitude of James MacGregor in the Robertson Smith Case is of interest among other things on account of the fact that he was Professor in such an important Chair of Theology in 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".<sup>7</sup> MacGregor's position receives little mention in the standard church histories and has received little, if any, attention even in those works that have been regarded as authorities on that case.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that MacGregor adhered strongly to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and was a strong advocate of the traditional views of revelation over against the higher critical theories and constructions.<sup>9</sup> William Brenton Greene, Jr, of Princeton wrote of MacGregor's later work, *The Apology of the Christian Religion*, Edinburgh, 1891, that it was "written in the spirit of strong, I had almost said bitter, and yet most intelligent opposition to the Higher Criticism".<sup>10</sup> The issue had to do with the apparent acceptance within the Free Church of current theories about the origin and development of the religion and documentation of the Bible, especially in relation to the

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<sup>6</sup> J. S. Black and G. Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith*, London, 1912, 175-176.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 186. The biographers are referring to the article "Bible" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th Edition, Volume III, 1875.

<sup>8</sup> 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* (T. Smith, 1888), *David Brown* (W. G. Blaikie, 1898), *Robert Rainy* (P. C. Simpson, 1909), and *Alexander Whyte* (G. F. Barbour, 1923). Notable exceptions are Norman L. Walker's *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (1895) and, of course, Black and Chrystal's biography of *Robertson Smith* (1912).

<sup>9</sup> See MacGregor's *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, Edinburgh, 1894, 238ff. See also H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation*, London, 1963, 271-273. As regards MacGregor's orthodoxy see Professor S. D. F. Salmond, *Critical Review*, V, 1895, 83, and *British Weekly*, 423, XVII (1894), 99.

<sup>10</sup> *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, Vol. V, 1894, 110.

Old Testament. Such ideas were designated the “Higher Criticism”. The young Free Church Professor in Aberdeen, William Robertson Smith, clearly espoused these views in articles submitted to the 9th Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, from 1875. The question was: how would the Free Church react to the challenge of his adopted position?

### **The position of Laidlaw and MacGregor**

In a useful biographical *Memoir* of Professor John Laidlaw (1832-1906) by Professor H. R. Mackintosh, prefixed to a posthumous volume of Laidlaw’s sermons there is reference to the case of Professor William Robertson Smith that throws light on the position taken in that case by James MacGregor.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Basically, Laidlaw’s motion, as originally framed by MacGregor, declared that “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”.<sup>13</sup> MacGregor had earlier commentated that, “. . . 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.”<sup>14</sup> Beith’s

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<sup>11</sup> H. R. Mackintosh, *Introductory Memoir*, prefixed to John Laidlaw, *Studies in the Parables*, London, 1907, 1-47. John Laidlaw (1832-1906) in 1880 was minister of the West Church in Aberdeen. In 1881 he was appointed successor to James MacGregor in the Chair of Systematic Theology in New College. Mackintosh (1870-1936) succeeded Laidlaw in the Chair of Systematic Theology at New College, upon the latter’s resignation in 1904. See Hugh Watt, *New College, Edinburgh*, Edinburgh, 1946, 230-231.

<sup>12</sup> MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*, Dunedin, 1890, 20-21. Cf. MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, Edinburgh, 1894, 338; Mackintosh, op. cit., 32: “Dr. Laidlaw . . . made the proposal which was backed by Professor James MacGregor in a powerful speech . . .” (cf. also page 34); *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (hereafter, *PDGAFCS*), Edinburgh, 1880, 187-189 (speech of Dr Laidlaw); 189-193 (speech of Professor MacGregor); and Norman L. Walker, *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1895, 282-284. See also J. S. Black and G. Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith*, London, 1912, 352.

<sup>13</sup> Walker, op. cit., 282-283.

<sup>14</sup> *Daily Review*, Thursday, 20th July 1876, Letter from “Presbyter”: (Professor Smith’s Article “Bible”). For the identification of MacGregor as “Presbyter” see Black and

motion, not dissimilar to Laidlaw's, additionally contained a censure of Smith "on account of offensiveness in his *manner* of dealing with Holy Scripture".<sup>15</sup> Before dealing with the position of John Laidlaw and James MacGregor it is necessary to give some background detail on this crucial case, which first arose within the Free Church in 1876.

### **Influences on Robertson Smith**

An allegedly brilliant theological student, William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), within weeks 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".<sup>16</sup>

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*, published in December 1875. It was clear from the article that Smith's views of the literary structure of the Old Testament had been profoundly influenced by the continental advocates of Old Testament historical criticism, Karl Graf (1815-1868), Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891), and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), especially the latter's. Professor Alec Cheyne of New College, Edinburgh, summarised Smith's views, as expressed in that article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "Smith's published article assumed that the Scripture narratives which we now possess are not the originals but later, edited versions of accounts dating from various periods in Jewish history. In particular, it contended that the 'Mosaic' legislation had first been promulgated, if not actually composed, during Israel's exile in Babylon (hundreds of years after Moses) and under the influence of the great eighth-century prophets: its attribution to Moses was not fraudulent, of course, but simply in accord with the recognised literary conventions of the age. The article also suggested that most of the psalms had not been written by David,

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Chrystal, op. cit., 186, and George Macaulay's "Presbyter's" *Defence of Robertson Smith Examined*, Edinburgh, 1876. Regarding the sentiments expressed see *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 187.

<sup>15</sup> MacGregor, *Studies in the History, etc.*, p. 338. For the complete text of Beith's motion see *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 243-244. See also Walker, op. cit., 283.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 272.



*William Robertson Smith.*

eliminated much of the predictive element in the prophets, and denied authorship of the Gospels to the evangelists whose names they bear. In sum, it required no extraordinary insight to realise that Smith's picture of the Bible, and of the Old Testament in particular, deviated very considerably from that which had long held sway in Scotland."<sup>17</sup>

These views have been described as the *Development* or *Documentary Hypothesis*.<sup>18</sup> Their reconstructions and dating of Israel's history and literature were largely informed by naturalistic evolutionary principles and Hegelian philosophy.<sup>19</sup> It is of interest to note that Smith spent two periods of study in Germany – in 1867 and again in 1869.

He was influenced there by men like Richard Rothe (1799-1867) (Bonn) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1899) (Gottingen). He was also profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).<sup>20</sup> The influence, too, of A. B. Davidson (1831-1902), Smith's Old Testament Professor in New College, 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

<sup>17</sup> A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk*, Edinburgh, 1983, 47. For another useful summary of the views expressed by Smith see also C. G. McCrie, *Confessions of the Church of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1907, 180ff.

<sup>18</sup> E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, London, 1964, 136-138. This hypothesis has been otherwise popularly known as the Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen hypothesis. For an able brief traditional conservative response to the theory see Young, 139-141 and O. T. Allis, *The Five Books of Moses*, Philadelphia, 1964. In 1896 the Church of Scotland minister W. L. Baxter (Cameron, Fife) wrote an able refutation of Wellhausen's (and Smith's) work: *Sanctuary and Sacrifice: A Reply to Wellhausen*, London, 1896, xviii+511pp.

<sup>19</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald R. Nelson, "The Theological Development of the Young Robertson Smith", *The Evangelical Quarterly*, XLV, No. 2, April-June 1973, 88-96. For a penetrating Reformed evaluation of the place and significance of Kant for modern Protestantism see Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, Nutley, N.J., 1971, 106-131.

infusion in Old Testament studies in Scotland. Robertson Smith caught the infection and spread the plague.”<sup>21</sup>

### **A violent commotion**

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 theologically orthodox and conservative. In the event, then, “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.”<sup>22</sup> 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 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.<sup>23</sup>

Earlier in 1877 – in March – a Commission of Assembly had instructed the Aberdeen Presbytery to examine Smith’s articles, invite his own explanation of them, and report back. In connection with some questions on the matter which certain 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 matter 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 by the Aberdeen Presbytery. This decision roused Smith, who indicated his wish that a libel be drawn up in order to necessitate a *judicial process*. The Assembly acceded to this and instructed the Aberdeen Presbytery to prepare a libel for heresy against

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<sup>21</sup> John Macleod, *op. cit.*, 288.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, *op. cit.*, 272-273.

<sup>23</sup> Smith’s article on “Angels” in the same *Encyclopaedia* raised serious questions about his belief in angels in general, and the fallen angels in particular. Sadly, the only dissenting voices in the College Committee on that issue were George Smeaton and David Brown (see *PDGAFCS*, 1877. Report V. A. Special Report of the College Committee on Professor Smith’s Article “Bible”, 30 (Smeaton’s Dissent), 39 (Brown’s Dissent).)

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*.<sup>24</sup> 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 according to his arguments, or, in other words, that it involved deception on the part of the *actual* author.<sup>25</sup>

### **Action taken to censure Smith**

It was in 1879 that the 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. 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 (1826-1906) which was finally carried.<sup>26</sup>

It should be understood that Smith was *not* deposed for heresy, for there was no libel – it had been dropped the previous year – neither did he forfeit his status as a minister of the Church, though he afterwards

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<sup>24</sup> “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, 205.)

<sup>25</sup> Walker, *op. cit.*, 280, for a summary of the original charges and the text of the reduced libel. Cf. MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, 337-338.

<sup>26</sup> See *PDGAFCS*, 1881, 77, for the complete text of Rainy’s motion. See also Walker, *op. cit.*, 288-289.



did not take a charge in the Church.<sup>27</sup> He was removed from the Chair on the ground that he had lost the confidence of the Church. In other words, it amounted to a no-confidence vote! Subsequently Smith accepted the post of Lord Almoner's Readership in Arabic at Cambridge, becoming in turn a Fellow of Christ's College, University Librarian, and ultimately Professor of Arabic. For the rest of his short life he was more or less a closeted scholar. He died of tuberculosis in Cambridge in 1894 at the comparatively early age of forty-seven. Like his mentor, A. B. Davidson, he was unmarried. Neither of these men ever held a pastoral charge in the Church.

### **The Assembly of 1880**

In the Assembly deliberations of 1880 on the libel process four motions were tabled. Those of Alexander Beith (1799-1891) and John Laidlaw have been briefly summarized above. Of the other two motions, one proposed by Sir Henry Wellwood Moncrieff (1809-1883) maintained that as Smith had in large measure forfeited the confidence of the Church, his Chair should be declared vacant. This was similar to the motion of Robert Rainy, which was carried the following year when the matter was concluded. The other motion, by James Begg (1808-1883) – 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, the libel should be passed from, though not without (1) an admonition of Smith to exercise caution and desist from teaching the critical views; and (2) a declaration that his views were not those of the Free Church.<sup>28</sup> 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*".<sup>29</sup> That would only serve to "shed a lurid light on the peculiar precariousness of the tenure of office enjoyed by the professors. It

<sup>27</sup> James MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*, Dunedin, 1889, 20; W. G. Blaikie, *David Brown*, London, 1898, 207.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Walker, *op. cit.*, 286; *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 187. The motion of Laidlaw only received 51 votes in the division, against 244 for Beith's (*PDGAFCS*, 1880, 243).

<sup>29</sup> Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, 32 (emphasis mine – J.K.); cf. *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 187.

suggested a discipline so flexible as to be seriously unworthy”<sup>30</sup> 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 correctly be described as having triumphantly survived a judicial process”.<sup>31</sup> Laidlaw clearly thought that *either* to condemn Smith by 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”.<sup>32</sup> This is an important consideration in Laidlaw’s line of argument 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”.<sup>33</sup> If, on the other hand, he was sent back to his Professoriate 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.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly Laidlaw and MacGregor hoped that the views espoused by Smith would be refuted in due time, though they 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 they felt that an assurance was obtained along the lines they suggested, then these opinions could be left without danger to subsequent study, which would, they believed, show them up for what they were: “imaginary”. In hindsight it is clear that this conviction, not uncommon amongst people thought to be conservatives at that time, was naïvely sanguine, as subsequent history has demonstrated.

### **An evaluation**

How can we evaluate this case, and in particular James MacGregor’s role in it? The following observations may be made:

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 32; *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 188.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 33; *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 188.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 33; *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 188.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 33; *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 188.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 33; *PDGAFCS*, 1880, 189.

(1) As to the *ecclesiastical process* in the case itself, it would seem that the libel as originally framed was not clear enough in showing how Smith's views really deviated from the Confessional doctrine of Scripture. It is arguable that if, as suggested by Walker,<sup>35</sup> a more direct 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 the inerrant source 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 (1831-1902), who as assistant to John "Rabbi" Duncan had been first Lecturer and Tutor and then Professor, of Old Testament at New College from 1858. There had been a "strange silence" about Davidson's views in the Church. It is true that Principal John Macleod states that "Dr Duncan, when his junior colleague, A. B. Davidson, began to show signs of going of on rationalistic lines . . . called in the help of [George] Smeaton to do what he could to reclaim him".<sup>36</sup> 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. In a real sense this made Davidson even more dangerous than Smith in loosening attachment to traditional and orthodox views of Revelation and Inspiration. To the end of his days Davidson never really reconciled his generally orthodox *theological* position with his *critical* views. Geerhardus Vos of Princeton Theological Seminary was to say this in a contemporary observation on Davidson's position: "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."<sup>37</sup> It may easily be imagined therefore, that it would be all

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<sup>35</sup> Walker, op. cit., 290-291. This form is a slight adaptation of the one suggested by Walker.

<sup>36</sup> Macleod, op. cit., 288: From where Macleod gleaned this anecdote is unattributed. There is no reference to that situation either in the Biography of Davidson (J. Strahan, 1917) or Robertson Smith (J. S. Black and G. W. Chrystal, 1912).

<sup>37</sup> Geerhardus Vos, in a review of A. B. Davidson's *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1904, in *The Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. IV, 1906, 119.

the more difficult *to prove* inconsistency between Confessional *doctrine* and the critical positions. Unfortunately this was one of the “knots” which tied up James MacGregor – and the Free Church – in the Robertson Smith Case.

(2) The case was undoubtedly complicated by Smith’s strong claims of adherence to the *Westminster Confession* and Reformation principles. The use of evangelical terminology by such men in expressing their views served to impress many orthodox conservative theologians such as MacGregor. MacGregor himself was to say that, “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”.<sup>38</sup> Later in his life he was to repeat the same thing: “He [Smith] . . . was earnestly in sympathy with the Church’s evangelical faith.”<sup>39</sup> As a result a basic dualism was evident. Writing fifty years later Donald Maclean 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 connoting entirely different conceptions from what a modernist actually believes. In this way they shall *appear* to hold evangelical beliefs while accepting modernist critical views.”<sup>40</sup> In the realm of Biblical scholarship this has plagued the Church over the years since the days of the Robertson Smith Case.

With special reference to the Robertson Smith case, Thomas Carlyle apparently 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?”<sup>41</sup> It is possible that Robertson Smith – and James MacGregor and others – did not recognize the incongruity, or incompatibility, of these views with the view of the Bible maintained by the *Confession of Faith*. It seemed that there was a lack of awareness of the alien presuppositions under-girding Smith’s work, or at least their logical outworking. Ronald Nelson, writing

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<sup>38</sup> *Daily Review*, Thursday, 20th July 1876.

<sup>39</sup> James MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*, Dunedin, 1889, 20. Cf. Blaikie, *op. cit.*, 198; and A. R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution*, Penguin Books, 1961, 171: “He [Smith] was an earnest evangelical who accepted the Calvinist doctrines of the Westminster Confession.”

<sup>40</sup> D. Maclean, *Aspects of Scottish Church History*, Edinburgh, 1927, 170-171.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 171.

in 1973, brought this out when he wrote that “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 popularise in Great Britain.”<sup>42</sup> Clearly there was not sufficient awareness by many at that time, including orthodox theologians like James MacGregor and John Laidlaw, of the underlying unbelieving principles and presuppositions in Smith’s position, and *their* inconsistency with truly Protestant and reformed principles. It was not sufficiently discerned how devastating the promotion of such ideas would be to the spiritual health of the Church and Nation in the twentieth century.

(3) Though there is more than an element of truth in the view 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, in retrospect this view may be seen as a selling of the cause of truth down the river. After all, it would provide as wide an entrance for such views as their advocates may have wished.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, this was Smith’s own reaction to the decision of the 1880 Assembly, which was not substantially different from Laidlaw’s motion, and was used by him as the main thrust of his defence of his subsequent article, “Hebrew Language and Literature”.<sup>44</sup> It may be noted here that even the final Assembly decision of 1881, relieving Smith from the Chair in Aberdeen was considered by many of his friends as a triumph for his views.<sup>45</sup> However, in all fairness it must be pointed out that in the heat 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: “But that case, the like of which had not occurred once before in 300 years . . . ”<sup>46</sup> In the second place Smith strongly professed his adherence to evangelical truth, including the inspiration of Scripture though, as pointed out above, it is a moot point

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<sup>42</sup> Nelson, *op. cit.*, 99.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Macleod, *op. cit.* 308.

<sup>44</sup> Walker, *op. cit.*, 285-286.

<sup>45</sup> Vidler, *op. cit.*, 173; Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, 446ff.

<sup>46</sup> MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*, 21.

whether what he meant by that term corresponded to the real position of the Westminster divines and the Reformed Churches. In the third place, it appears to have been their hope 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* in which he took much the same ground on the Old Testament question as William Henry Green and Geerhardus Vos of Princeton Theological Seminary. At one point MacGregor gives this withering critique of Robertson Smith: “The Cambridge Arabic professor is found to be in his thinking receptive rather than originative, – 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.”<sup>47</sup>

In more recent times the Old Testament scholar O. T. Allis pointed out how there was real optimism amongst conservative scholars at the beginning of the twentieth 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.<sup>48</sup> It need hardly be said that this optimism was not realised. In retrospect there seems to have been considerable naïvety on the part of such optimists. 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 United Free Church College. This Smith was another former pupil of Davidson. He had entered the Free Church ministry a year after the conclusion of the Robertson Smith case.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, 269.

<sup>48</sup> O. T. Allis, *The Old Testament, its Claims and Critics*, Nutley, N.J., 1972, vii; cf. Young, *op. cit.*, 139.

<sup>49</sup> See J. R. Fleming, *The Church in Scotland 1875-1929*, Edinburgh, 1933, 59.

(4) 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 counter-balanced by the fact that *they* did not possess the historical perspective of later generations. The fact is, however, that able theologians and scholars of the calibre of MacGregor and Orr should have discerned more clearly that the logical outcome of the basically naturalistic positions espoused by Robertson Smith *et al* would be modernism . . . and worse. In his monogram on *Freud* Rousas J. Rushdoony has a comment on the impact of Robertson Smith on the Social Sciences: “The anthropology he [Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)] went to, moreover, was ostensibly religious but actually naturalistic, namely, William Robertson Smith’s (1846-1894), whose works, in particular *The Religion of the Semites*, are basic to an understanding both of the meaning of modernism in the churches and of Freudianism as a psychology.”<sup>50</sup>

(5) It is scarcely tenable to maintain, as MacGregor and Laidlaw did, that no *doctrine* of the *Confession of Faith* was impugned by the critical positions.<sup>51</sup> There is a real dichotomy between the *Westminster Confession’s* doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture involving the *supernatural* origin of the Bible, the canon of Scripture, etc., and the doctrine of the critics, naturalistic, evolutionary, and modernistic as it was. Far from being not contradictory, these positions are really diametrically opposed. As R. L. Dabney aptly commented: “No fair man doubts but that the *Confession of the Free Church*, Chap. 1, 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.”<sup>52</sup> But this was something other Free Church divines also discerned. George Smeaton, for example, dissented from the original report of the special sub-Committee set up in 1876 in these terms: “I hold that the doctrine of Inspiration and Professor Smith’s views are

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<sup>50</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *Freud* (Modern Thinkers Series), Philadelphia, 1965, 21. See also page 24 of that work. The work of Robertson Smith in question was *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. Fundamental Institutions*. First Series (London: Adam & Charles Black 1889); second edition, edited by J. S. Black (1894).

<sup>51</sup> See *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter One. Cf. Hugh Martin, *The Westminster Doctrine of the Inspiration of Holy Scripture*, Edinburgh, 1877, for a contemporary discussion of that matter from the conservative side. See also B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, Cherry Hill, N.J., 1972, especially 261-333.

<sup>52</sup> R. L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, London, 1967, Vol. I, 401.

irreconcilable.”<sup>53</sup> As Nelson put it: “Smith emphatically rejected . . . propositional revelation, an infallible Bible, and a static system of doctrine.”<sup>54</sup> Such “rejections” could hardly be claimed of the compilers of the *Westminster Confession*! John Macleod later stated that “In his later years [Smith] . . . came to see . . . that his attitude to Holy Scripture was quite out of harmony with the *Westminster Confession*”.<sup>55</sup>

(6) It is arguable that, as Smith alleged, in the Scottish Reformed tradition there was too much reliance upon *systematic theology* at the expense of *biblical theology*, *antiquities and exegesis*. Smith maintained – as Davidson had done before him – that there was an inclination within that tradition to inform the exegesis by a pre-supposed dogmatic system.<sup>57</sup> Of course Robertson Smith went far beyond simply the application of exegetical principles in his work. He adopted speculative notions and applied evolutionary principles to his understanding of the Old Testament history. Exegesis and literary or historical analysis, however, will inevitably be influenced by presuppositions and such studies require to be guided by truly biblical and theistic presuppositions. Absolute neutrality is not possible.

Be that as it may, to some extent this may explain why, when the Robertson Smith case came to the forefront, there was general inability in the Church to deal conclusively with 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 or could not subvert the theology, so that James MacGregor could make this strange schizoid statement: “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

<sup>53</sup> *PDGAFCS*, May 1877. Report V. Appendix IV, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Nelson, op. cit., 99.

<sup>55</sup> Macleod, op. cit., 310. The source of this comment is not provided by Macleod.

<sup>56</sup> A. B. Davidson, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, Vol. I, London, 1862, 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.”

<sup>57</sup> Nelson, op. cit., 97-98.



unimportant.”<sup>58</sup> Later on MacGregor was to defend his position thus: “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.”<sup>59</sup> MacGregor, however, ought to have seen that “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*”.<sup>60</sup> It would seem clear that inadequate views of the *nature* of the Bible inevitably distort views of the *content* (i.e. doctrine or history), as subsequent history has demonstrated. A theologian and thinker of the stature of James MacGregor ought to have discerned this. He did not see the warning lights.

(7) As far as adherence to the *Westminster Confession* was concerned, it is perhaps ironical that MacGregor was in fact generally unsympathetic with modifications. In a later pamphlet he was to write this about the teaching of the *Confession*: “. . . there is nothing in this whole complexity of detailed articulations that occasions perplexity where men are agreed upon the substance of the whole: the Calvinism, in straight-forward clear simplicity, is ‘all in the whole, and all in every part’; so that a real Calvinist in going to this and that detail, finds only a cause for satisfaction on account of the masterly manner in which the substance of doctrine believed by him is here worked out into the detailed application.”<sup>61</sup> “We are greatly favoured,” he says further, by possessing in it what, in respect of strongly guarding the Christian doctrine which it clearly and fully declares, is reputedly the best constructed of all the great historical creeds.”<sup>62</sup> It has to be said, however, that MacGregor and other conservative men like him, did not sufficiently discern the real divergence between the views of the *Westminster Confession* on the matter of the inspiration of Scripture and those of the critical school, especially on the *nature* of biblical revelation and inspiration.

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<sup>58</sup> *Daily Review*, Thursday, 20th July 1876.

<sup>59</sup> MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, Edinburgh, 1894, 335.

<sup>60</sup> E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, London, 1963, 194.

<sup>61</sup> James MacGregor, *Presbyterians on Trial by Their Principles*, Dunedin, 1890, 29.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 29-30.



*James MacGregor.*

### **MacGregor: an erratic position**

There were those in the Free Church at those times who were clearly alarmed by the tendencies in historical criticism. George Smeaton (1814-1889), for example, was not only an outstanding exegete and Biblical theologian and scholar, he was also clear on the issues involved in the Higher Criticism. He had been at New College as Professor of Exegetical Theology since 1857 and was the author of immense books on the Atonement. He had studied these matters exhaustively. As early as the first College Committee Report of 1877 he entered his explicit dissents. He was aware that it was said that the negative criticism (i.e. so called "Higher Criticism") could be

separated from the underlying philosophy. He was not convinced, however, that they could be sundered. Whilst in one generation there may be acceptance of a certain inter-weaving of supernatural elements, how could one have confidence that future generations would not yield to the basic anti-supernatural philosophy behind the sort of criticism proposed? And then the question arose about the impact of all this on the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scripture? "Not only so," says Smeaton, "opinions which are fatal to inspiration, dislocating the unity of Scripture, and undermining the canonical rank of several books of Scripture on petty grounds of internal criticism, can only be called dangerous error tending to heresy."<sup>63</sup> He for one maintained that the Church should have proceeded to a libel immediately, as we have seen. He wrote with reference to the tendency of the Higher Critical views: "An attack on the genuineness and authority of the Scripture, whether dignified by the title of the higher criticism or prompted by the lower scepticism, ought never to be permitted within the Church on the part of any office-bearer. We can keep criticism within its proper limits, and this

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<sup>63</sup> *PDGAFCS*, May 1877. Report V. Appendix IV, 32.

occasion may have been permitted to occur that we may show to other churches how we can act in the exercise of our independent jurisdiction.”<sup>64</sup> Besides Smeaton there were other Free Church men who wrote able books against the critical positions, such as Alexander Moody Stuart (1809-1898)<sup>65</sup> and George C. M. Douglas (1826-1904), the Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature in the Glasgow Free Church College.<sup>66</sup>

MacGregor’s inconsistency on the matter of Robertson Smith and his critical views really derived from two arguably unsatisfactory positions:

(1) First of all there was his failure to recognise that the critical views essentially challenged the confessional doctrine of Scripture, because they challenged the reliability of the Bible as a faithful historical record. He was taken in by the claims of those favourable to the historical criticism both in relation to the inspiration of the Scriptures, and in relation to the evangelical doctrines of the *Westminster Confession*. As a result he failed to appreciate the differences there were in the use of terms in both these areas: inspiration of Scripture and evangelical doctrine and experience. It did not seem to strike MacGregor that the “believing critics” (as he would have seen it) adopted the exact same presuppositions held by the unbelieving or “destructive” critics, and just how much at odds these presuppositions were with the confessional view of the Bible as to its nature and inspiration.

(2) Secondly there was his feeling that the critical matters needed to be aired to avoid an undue interest being generated in the issues if they were simply suppressed. He did not agree with the views but he clearly miscalculated just how settled the critics were, even in the Free Church, on the critical positions, not least through the work of A. B. Davidson over many years, and how difficult they would be to counter effectively if they were tolerated for the purpose of debate, though not accepted formally in the Church. Decisive action was required but MacGregor was not inclined to be decisive in outlawing the views in the Church.

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>65</sup> A. Moody Stuart, *The Bible True to Itself: A Treatise on the Historical Truth of the Old Testament*, London, 1884.

<sup>66</sup> G. C. M. Douglas, *Why I still believe that Moses wrote Deuteronomy*, Edinburgh, 1878; G. C. M. Douglas, *The Old Testament and its Critics*, Glasgow, 1892.

This was a naïve position. It was exposed by fellow Free Church minister James Smith of Tarland, Aberdeenshire. Smith, commenting on an article of MacGregor's which had appeared in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* in April 1877,<sup>67</sup> wrote that: "Others also we find assuming awkward positions, which appear to us inconsistent, and which it must be impossible permanently to occupy. Professor Macgregor, e.g., considers the question about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as one 'not of abstruse scholarship, but of morality', and that any one personating Moses would probably have been stoned as a profane person; he is strongly of opinion that Christ was completely committed to the Mosaic authorship, and he regards it as 'inconceivable that God should have inspired or authorised any man to put on the false face of the supposed impersonation'. But then again, he tells us that, if we insist upon all this, we run the risk of driving some men into infidelity! that we must not only permit but encourage the new teaching – no doubt, under the plausible guise of 'scholarly inquiry' – otherwise we will do 'enormous damage to the Christian cause in the rising generation'! If we ask, in alarm and amazement: How so? we are told that 'the question is exercising the minds of our young people, and must exercise it more and more until the question is definitively settled in the way of real ascertainment' – all which is a mere hallucination; our young people are not greatly exercised about anything of the kind. There is much exercise of another sort among others than our young people in the Church at present."<sup>68</sup>

It is only fair to say that there is no evidence that personally James MacGregor deviated from the traditional positions on the matters raised by the historical criticism of the Bible. In his later two-volume Handbook on *Exodus* (Edinburgh, 1889), and trilogy of Apologetic works (Edinburgh, 1891-1894), he takes up positions against the critical positions. In the Robertson Smith case, however, he showed himself to be inconsistent and undiscerning on the issues in question. He apparently

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<sup>67</sup> James MacGregor, "Age of the Pentateuch, with Special Reference to Revelation and Inspiration", *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. C, April 1877, 254-274.

<sup>68</sup> James Smith, *Professor Smith on the Bible*, Edinburgh, 1877, 44. Smith (1838-1900) was Free Church minister at Tarland, about thirty miles west of Aberdeen. Smith was closely involved with the case as it came before the Free Synod of Aberdeen in 1879. See his *Professor Smith's New Plea and the Presbytery's Procedure; Being the Substance of a Speech delivered in the Free Synod of Aberdeen, 14th October, 1879*, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, 1879. This is an able speech of 44 pages which was published by request.

said of his New College Colleague, George Smeaton, that he had “the best-constituted theological intellect in Christendom”.<sup>69</sup> It is just a pity he did not follow his older colleague on this matter of the critical positions of Robertson Smith. Not that he accepted Smith’s critical views – by no means. In his Assembly Speech of May 27th 1880 he went as far as to say this: “If I object to the new view and refuse to dismiss the professor who is said to hold it, what am I to do in favour of the received view which I embrace? Well, if life and health be given me, I may endeavour to refute the new views off the face of the earth.”<sup>70</sup> It has to be said that this was something he attempted in his later works in Apologetics.<sup>71</sup> No lesser theologians than the Princeton divines, William B. Greene and Benjamin B. Warfield, thought highly of these volumes of MacGregor’s.<sup>72</sup> It is clear from his last book, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, that MacGregor had a high regard for the work of the American conservative Old Testament scholars, including the Princeton Professors William Henry Green and Geerhardus Vos.<sup>73</sup> By that time, sadly, the critical views had prevailed in scholarly circles. As Alec Cheyne put it in 1980: “Long before 1914, the view taken by [W. R.] Smith, [J. S.] Candlish, [A. B.] Bruce, and [M.] Dods had triumphed in all the major Presbyterian Churches in Scotland, and the Biblical revolution had run its course.”<sup>74</sup>

The effect of this “revolution”, however, is another thing. The deadening effect on vital faith in the critics themselves, and the subsequent impact on the Church and true piety have rarely been examined. In relation to the last decade of the nineteenth century in this connection Kenneth Ross commented that, “Given the force of the

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<sup>69</sup> John Macleod, op. cit., 289. Macleod, unfortunately, does not provide the source of this statement.

<sup>70</sup> *PDGAFCS*, May 1880, 191.

<sup>71</sup> *The Apology of the Christian Religion*, Edinburgh, 1891, 544pp; *The Revelation and the Record*, Edinburgh, 1893, xii+265pp; *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, Edinburgh, 1894, ii+370pp.

<sup>72</sup> See Dr Kim Riddlebarger’s 1997 Doctoral Dissertation, *The Lion of Princeton*. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield: Apologist, Polemicist and Theologian. See pages 167, 180, 259, 284, 287, 296-7, 299, 351, 360 of the on-line edition (<http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/b-b-warfield-the-lion-of-pr/>).

<sup>73</sup> See, MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, 279: “Professor Green of Princeton (*Moses and the Prophets*, etc.), protagonist there of the received Christian view in its completeness; whose judgement in a *real* of Old Testament Hebrew scholarship is perhaps the weightiest now in the Christian world.” See page 279 and following for admiring remarks by MacGregor on American conservative scholars.

<sup>74</sup> A. C. Cheyne, op. cit., 57.

spreading naturalism of the late nineteenth century thought, the instinct of faith scarcely seems an adequate defence for the integrity of a supernatural religion. Yet it was the very strength and conviction of their evangelical faith which persuaded [Marcus] Dods and others that their Christianity was impregnable. It blinded them to the fact that the concessions they made broke down the orthodox line of defence so that the essence of faith was exposed to serious danger. They never appreciated the magnitude of what was done in the 1889-1892 period.”<sup>75</sup>

Exactly what the strength and conviction of the “evangelical faith” of these men was must be debatable. In a revealing comment written in 1902, Marcus Dods (1834-1909), a Free Churchman who had embraced the newer criticism, surmised: “I wish I could live as a spectator through the next generation to see what they are going to make of things. There will be a grand turn up in matters theological, and the churches won’t know themselves fifty years hence. It is to be hoped some little rag of faith may be left when all’s done. For my own part I am sometimes entirely under water and see no sky at all.”<sup>76</sup> The truth is that very little of a “rag of faith” has survived in Scottish Church life. The legacy of the “newer criticism” was far-reaching and destructive to the strength and conviction of evangelical faith, by which alone authentic Christianity can really prosper.

## Postscript

James MacGregor was conservative in his biblical and systematic theology.<sup>77</sup> It is passing strange, however, that he did not see that the critical views effectively undermined the authority and historical integrity of the doctrine and authority of Scripture which he himself maintained. More discerning was fellow Free churchman, Alexander Moody Stuart, whom MacGregor cites with approbation in his *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*.<sup>78</sup> Moody Stuart in 1884 wrote perceptively on the issue of the critical views and their consequences:

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<sup>75</sup> K. R. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland*. Edinburgh, 1988, 222-223.

<sup>76</sup> *Later Letters of Marcus Dods, D.D.* (Selected and Edited by his son, Marcus Dods, M.A., Advocate), London, 1911, 67.

<sup>77</sup> More recently the historian, Peter C. Matheson, one-time Lecturer in Church History at New College, Edinburgh, stated that “MacGregor was a considerable scholar of the old Calvinist mould, with a well-stocked, subtle mind”. (Stewart J. Brown and George Newlands (eds.), *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World*, Edinburgh, 2000, 129.)

<sup>78</sup> MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, 276.

“The word of the Lord is pure, and out of this trial will come forth in all its brightness as silver out of the furnace. But, meanwhile, an unutterable calamity may overtake us, for our children may lose the one treasure we are bound to bequeath to them; and for long years they may wander ‘through dry places seeking rest, and finding none’, before they recover their hold of the Word of Life, and regain their footing on the rock of eternal truth.”<sup>79</sup>

James MacGregor himself recorded in a footnote to his last book on apologetics remarks made to him by Alexander Duff (1806-1878) about the critical views: “Dr. Duff, ‘the prince of missionaries’, said to the present writer, in answer to the question, How the new critical views would work in India? that they would be simply ruinous, destroying the foundations.”<sup>80</sup> What was true for India was also true elsewhere, as the history of the Church has subsequently indicated.

In the year of the conclusion to the case of William Robertson Smith (1881) James MacGregor, for reasons of his own health and that of his family, resigned his Chair at New College and emigrated from Scotland to New Zealand. The following year he took a charge at Oamaru in the South Island, within the Presbyterian Synod of Otago and Southland. He took his full part in the life of the Synod and acquired a reputation as “in his time, the best-known Presbyterian theologian in Australasia”.<sup>81</sup> Among other things he repeatedly sought to counter the theologically liberal trends and the moves for confessional revision which were affecting the Churches in the Antipodes every bit as much as in the old country. He was always active with his pen and frequently broke a lance in defence of traditional historic Calvinism.<sup>82</sup> James MacGregor passed away suddenly at Oamaru in October 1894. His mortal remains were laid to rest in the cemetery at Oamaru in a plot over which a memorial stone was later erected by congregational and public subscription.

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<sup>79</sup> A. Moody Stuart, *The Bible True to Itself*, London, 1884, 187.

<sup>80</sup> MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, 309.

<sup>81</sup> Ian Breward, “MacGregor, James 1829-1894”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22nd June 2007.

<sup>82</sup> See particularly his pamphlets: *The Day of Salvation (2 Cor. vi, 2) obscured in a recent pamphlet on ‘The Reign of Grace’* (Wellington and Dunedin: New Zealand Bible, Tract, and Book Depot, 1888); *Freedom in the Truth under Shield of a Constitution of Government and of Doctrine, in accordance with the Word of God*. (Wellington and Dunedin: New Zealand Bible, Tract, and Book Depot, 1889); and, *Blown in the Wind or Growing by the River? Presbyterians on Trial by their Principles*. (Wellington and Dunedin: New Zealand Bible, Tract, and Book Society, 1890.)