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ON  
THE ABERDEEN CASE  
BY  
A PRE-DISRUPTION ELDER.

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Member of the Faculty of  
Advocates.  
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EDINBURGH

JOHN MACLAREN & SON, PRINCES STREET

1880.



# THOUGHTS ON THE ABERDEEN CASE

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THERE is reason to believe that the merits of this Case are very imperfectly understood by many persons whose opinions in regard to it are held with much tenacity of feeling, and expressed with a corresponding warmth of language. That this should be the case is almost inevitable. The initial obstacles in the way of reaching a sound, unprejudiced conclusion were numerous, and like difficulties are becoming more numerous and perplexing, as time passes and the contest thickens. Let us try to exhibit some of these, without saying anything that might be deemed personal, or likely to give offence to reasonable minds.

1. The writings in which Professor W. Robertson Smith's views first appeared were printed in the new edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, a very large and expensive work, beyond the reach of most readers, even of those whose tastes and literary

habits might have led them to peruse the articles, if published in a cheaper and more accessible form. The space to which the author was necessarily restricted, especially in the article "BIBLE,"—a topic of extraordinary comprehensiveness, as every one will admit,—led him to write in a style, condensed, scientific, and full of learned allusions; because, having things to say which scholarly and expert readers could alone understand and care much about, he was compelled to leave untouched many of the ordinary and routine subjects which formed the staple of former editions, and which the religious community might naturally expect to find substantially repeated in the new.

Without homologating these as his own, the learned author desired to refer to and expound some of the more salient views of modern theologians and critics, especially of the German schools; but now, when all this excitement has arisen, he has expressed his regret again and again, that, inadvertently, he did not adequately define his own position as a loyal believer in an inspired Bible, and did not pay sufficient regard to the religious instincts and sensibilities of the sound, orthodox and well-instructed people who constitute the membership of the various Evangelical Churches of his native land.

This feeling on the part of religious people is one

in which the present writer participated, and still in some measure participates. It made him approach the perusal of Professor Smith's article "BIBLE," with prejudice; and he does not wonder that many—whose prejudices have been fanned into more intense feelings—have never shaken off their original impression.

The truth is, that the article which has caused so much alarm and anxiety in the minds of conscientious Christian men and women might, so far as they are concerned, have lain virtually silent and unknown to this day, amid the ponderous columns of the *Encyclopædia*, awaiting the approval or condemnation of professors and other learned theologians, for whom it was specially and most reasonably intended. We shall not inquire how it suddenly started into popular notice, because that inquiry might lead to warm and unpleasant rejoinders. It is enough to remind our readers that heresy-hunters have swarmed in all generations, and that rival Churches naturally dislike the notion that their own denomination should stand alone in being credited with heretical infirmities.

2. It will be obvious, from what we have already said, that when the existence of writings such as we have described—learned, concise, full of literary allusions nearly unintelligible to ordinary readers,

and devoid of all pious and improving comments,—came to be known, it was natural and unavoidable, that an alarm, almost amounting to panic, should seize the imaginations of many earnest well-meaning persons. The subjects handled in the article were comparatively novel—even to professional readers—and being clothed in language demanding attention, accuracy of thought, previous knowledge of recondite discussions and learned references, is it at all wonderful that much gross exaggeration should take place, and that even persons of receptive and reasonable minds should be hurried into a summary condemnation of the author's views, without having any surer ground to stand upon than the general *on dit* of others little better informed than themselves?

The matter came before the College Committee, and, even in that exceptionally intelligent and well-informed body, it was soon apparent that the time had not yet arrived when the questions raised could receive that calm, thorough, scientific, and weighty consideration which their importance demanded. Most of the members of that Committee expressed those views which their previous training and their ecclesiastical antecedents and tendencies led onlookers almost instinctively to expect; a few members urged that time should be given, and toleration shown, to the young and able Professor



who had unwittingly kindled so great a flame; and others were strong and determined in their alarmed denunciation of his rashness. Each of these sections of the Committee had its warm partisans throughout the Church; and long before the General Assembly of 1877, it was too evident that the *perfervidum ingenium Scotorum* was roused. Even at this early stage of the case, therefore, the original difficulties in the way of a sound, calm, unimpassioned decision were greatly enhanced. Already the tocsin had been sounded in quarters of the country where defective knowledge of current events is not uncommon, where prejudices of various kinds prevail, and where the idea easily arises that the Church is in danger and the Bible at a discount. A similar alarm has been awakened again and again since the Free Church of Scotland came forth from the flesh-pots of Egypt and purchased her independence, at a great price, in the memorable year of the Disruption.

It ought to be borne in mind that, while things were manifestly becoming confused at this comparatively early date—the Assembly of 1877—Professor Smith, with a natural regard to the interests of truth and of his own position, took the important step of demanding a libel, as the constitutional mode of bringing indefinite accusations and

rumours, stripped of exaggeration, to a clear and definite issue.<sup>1</sup>

1 The General Assembly of 1877 accordingly instructed the Presbytery of Aberdeen to libel Professor Smith. This was done probably with the best advice available under the circumstances. A large majority of the Presbytery, whose intimate knowledge of Professor Smith's antecedents, his high character, his rare attainments, his success as a teacher, gave weight to their decision, did not find the libel relevant, and have since stood by him through all the subsequent proceedings.

The case came up by appeal to the next General Assembly, which met at Glasgow in May 1878.<sup>2</sup>

In that Assembly there was a great amount of discussion, both at the bar and in the House, and several votes were taken, the result being that the ground was considerably cleared, and only a portion of the libel, as originally framed, remained for further adjudication.

Here let us clearly understand the main points in

<sup>1</sup> It is worthy of being noted that an eminent minister of the Church, still spared to us, although an octogenarian, expressed his deliberate and well-considered opinion, that no living theologian would be found capable of framing a relevant libel in the case; an opinion, as we think, in the fair way of being confirmed in the end.

<sup>2</sup> Let me here remark, once for all, that absolute accuracy regarding minute details is not attempted in this brief sketch of the case. I aim at giving the broad and characteristic features, without rashly committing myself to unimportant statements whose accuracy might be impugned.

regard to Deuteronomy which Professor Smith maintains, points which have brought down upon him so much condemnation and so much suspicion of general unsoundness. He has professed all along an unshaken faith in the Divine inspiration of the Bible in general, and of Deuteronomy in particular; but being, as Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis, called upon, and in duty bound, to make himself master of everything that bears on these topics, including the criticism of several learned men regarding the authorship of Deuteronomy, at variance with and hostile to the commonly-accepted view that the Book is strictly historical, and almost exclusively the work of Moses, he came to see that the said allegations contain an element of truth, and do not admit of being honestly and safely ignored. We say safely, because no *facts* can be set aside and ignored, if we mean to defend the word of God against competent scholars who *know* that such facts exist, and that these must modify our preconceived opinions. A familiarity with the original language of the Pentateuch, and a careful survey of Jewish history and institutions, have led men of acute critical mind to the conclusion that the Book of Deuteronomy, as we now possess it, must have been edited, and so far modified, at a date considerably later than the death

of Moses—a conclusion arrived at not only by avowed rationalists and sceptics, but by men of a very different stamp, men sound in the common faith, and loyal to the entire circle of Christian doctrine. This being the case, Professor Smith undertook, as an honest and conscientious man, to grapple with these difficulties to the best of his ability. His explanations may seem far-fetched; they may be viewed as inadequate; they may be accounted rash; but offered as they are, in the cause of truth, by a man of evangelical sentiments and faithful to the Westminster Confession, they surely deserve a more tolerant reception than that which they have obtained.

The Confession of Faith, be it remembered, is *silent* as to the authorship and historical character of Deuteronomy. Moses may have written most of it, and it may be substantially a historical Book; but for a decision, even an opinion, on these points, we apply in vain to the Confession—a work laboriously and prayerfully drawn up by such men, among others, as Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie, and George Gillespie, men too learned, too wise, too cautious to commit themselves, or us their successors, to an authoritative deliverance on any such questions.

The charge of “publishing or promulgating opinions which contradict or are opposed to the doctrine of the

immediate inspiration, infallible truth, and Divine authority of the Holy Scriptures or of any part or parts thereof," was supported by a series of six subordinate charges and derived its colour from them. The discussion came eventually to be on the second of these which ran as follows :—

"*Secundo*. Albeit the opinion that the book of inspired Scripture called Deuteronomy, which is professedly a historical record, does not possess that character, but was made to assume it by a writer of a much later age, who therein, in the name of God, presented in dramatic form, instructions and laws as proceeding from the mouth of Moses, though these never were, and never could have been, uttered by him."

We have probably said enough to enable our readers to understand the course taken by Sir Henry Moncreiff and by Principal Rainy in their respective motions in the Assembly of 1878. The former moved as follows: "The General Assembly sustain the dissent and complaint against the judgment of the Presbytery, in relation to the second particular as applying to the first charge, and reverse the judgment of the Presbytery so far as to find *that* part of the libel relevant, to the effect that the statements quoted in the *minor* proposition, as those of Professor Smith regarding the Book of Deuteronomy, amount to what is expressed in the said part, and are opposed in their legitimate results to the supposition of the Book being a thoroughly

inspired historical record according to the teaching of the Westminster Confession, *while his declarations on the subject of inspiration are the reverse of satisfactory, and do not indicate his acceptance of the Book in that character.*"

Number *one* had been found irrelevant by the Assembly, and number *two* thus came before the Court for decision. The subject of inspiration had not been directly introduced into the libel, and yet it will be observed that the foregoing motion derived a large part of its significancy from the addition of the words printed in italics. It was felt at the time, by Professor Smith's friends, that the passage, thus introduced into the motion, placed him at a disadvantage in prospect of a vote; the addition was specially animadverted on in Principal Rainy's speech, and became the occasion, afterwards, of a series of weighty reasons of dissent.

Principal Rainy, in a powerful speech, animated by that rare faculty, which he possesses in an eminent degree, of regarding both sides of a question, and of realising fairly the standpoint of his opponents, moved "that the Assembly dismiss the dissent and complaint, and sustain the judgment of the Presbytery." A vote was taken. 301 voted for Sir Henry Moncreiff's motion; 278 for Principal Rainy's, making a majority of 23 for the former.

It is worth while, as rendering the result of this vote quite clear, to introduce here the reasons of dissent already alluded to.

“Because the judgment is incompetent as a judicial sentence, in respect that it proceeds on the sense ascribed to a declaration of Professor Smith, in his defence, on which he had no notice to plead, either from the bar or the house, on which he did not plead, and on which it does not appear that he has been dealt with, for explanation or otherwise, in any court; and in respect that the judgment was argued for from the same materials, and that Professor Smith was not heard thereon.

“Because Professor Smith, in the extracts charged under this particular of charge first, does not deny the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures, and, in particular, of the Book of Deuteronomy, but maintains the same.

“Because the theory that Deuteronomy presents in a peculiar literary form, but under the guidance of inspiration, the legislation of an age later than that of Moses, whatever objections may apply to it, and whatever dangers may be apprehended in connection with it, does not in itself conflict directly with any views of inspiration, even the most strict.

“Because in order to establish consequences as arising from the said theory tending to show that it is opposed to the Confession in its results, it is necessary to make assumptions which are not borne out by the Confession on the one hand, or which are repudiated by Professor Smith on the other; and both modes of procedure are illegitimate.

“Because the statement of Professor Smith already referred to, in the first reason, whatever the effect of it may

be, could, in any view, communicate to his theory of Deuteronomy no new responsibility in reference to the Church's doctrine of the Bible, and ought to have been dealt with on its own merits.

“Because it is of great moment to the successful maintenance and defence of the truth, that when opinions are published which are apprehended to have in them any elements of danger, the mode of dealing with them should be such as does not strain the discipline of the Church nor abridge the liberty of its office-bearers.

“Because the present state of critical studies, especially with reference to the Pentateuch, renders it necessary that a large discretion should be allowed to the office-bearers of the Church, in any honest efforts to do justice to indications of criticism, so long as faith in the peculiar origin, office, and authority of the Scriptures is maintained.”

Number *three* came up for consideration in the evening, after the discussion, already mentioned, regarding number *two*. The pleadings at the bar being finished, Professor Smith had an opportunity of addressing the Assembly before they proceeded to judgment. His address was remarkably luminous and high-toned, and obviously made a very favourable impression on the House. He had been accused in the libel of holding views regarding the Book of Chronicles inconsistent with due reverence for the Word of God ; and many, who had previously formed suspicions in accordance with such allegations, seemed now to have their eyes opened and their



minds sensibly relieved, as the Professor expounded his real views and sentiments with clearness and ingenuous candour. He had been accused of holding that the Chronicler wrote under the influence of party spirit and for party purposes, whereas all his assertion amounted to this: that the Chronicler, being probably a temple-singer, took a special interest in the affairs of temple-singers. He had never categorically affirmed that there existed any error in the Chronicles. The state of the case is this:—The Book of Chronicles contains a history, which, by the admission of every one, is a *late* history. In that history, the author, by Divine permission, used earlier materials, and he (Professor Smith) believed that the author, living at a much later date, was permitted, for a good purpose in the hands of God, to give this later view of the history of Israel, side by side with the earlier and contemporary histories. Without inquiring into problems too high for us to solve, and asking what special purpose in the Divine wisdom was served by the insertion of such a book in the canon, he might at least say, that it was not without reason and purpose that we have the history in this latter form. In opposition to rationalistic and sceptical writers, who disparaged the Book of Chronicles, he had stated throughout his article, *first*, that the Chronicler had

authentic materials before him, and that, therefore, his book was of value as a testimony to authentic history; and, *second*, that he looked at the question of the purpose of God, in giving us this later book, as letting us know how the ancient history appeared to a later writer. He quoted from the article in question, and went on to ask, how any one acquainted with the present state of scholarship and discussion, writing in a book addressed to the general public, and anxious to recommend the Book of Chronicles to people of all theological opinions, would be likely to succeed in his purpose, if he had to start from the theory of inspiration which holds that it is absolutely impossible that in the slightest and most trivial verbal matter, there could be an error in the text of the Word of God. The Confession holds no such view. It holds no theory of inspiration at all.

Of course, in this reference to Professor Smith's admirable speech, it is impossible to give more than a very condensed view of what he said; and the reader will find it, and all other parts of the debate, in the printed Blue-book of Proceedings for 1878. One sentence, quoted by Professor Smith from his printed answer, deserves to be seriously pondered by all those who have hitherto attributed unsatisfactory views on inspiration to this gentleman:—"In all the Confessions, the Bible is recognised as the inspired

Word of God, not on the ground of any theory as to the influence of the Holy Spirit upon the writers *in actu scribendi*, but (1) because in the Scriptures, the revelation of God and His will, first preached through the prophets, is now reduced to writing; and (2) because the witness of the Spirit by and with the Word in our heart assures us that in these Scriptures God still speaks to us." That this is a reasonable and sound view of what is meant by inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, we hope to show at a subsequent stage of this discussion.

When the vote was taken on *tertio*, the result was found to be as follows:—144 voted for the motion of Dr. Thomas Smith; 284 for that of Mr. Isdale. Dr. Smith's motion was:—

"That the Assembly sustain the dissent and complaint, and reverse the judgment of the Presbytery to the extent of finding that the statement of Professor Smith, that an inspired writer allowed himself the same freedoms as were taken by ancient historians, is, in the sense in which it appears to the General Assembly to be used by him, so unguarded and extreme, as to be incompatible with the inspiration and infallible truth of the Sacred Scriptures."

Mr. Isdale's motion was:—

"That the Assembly dismiss the dissent and complaint, and affirm the judgment of the Presbytery."

His short but pregnant speech appears to be so well-fitted for throwing light on the whole of

this controversy, that we shall offer no apology for quoting it.

“ Into the Holy Scriptures there enter two elements, the Divine and the human ; but the *nexus* between the two no one here, I suppose, would pretend accurately to define. The Confession does not define that *nexus*, and if Professor Smith is to be condemned under this count, we must frame a theory of inspiration much more stringent than what is laid down in the Confession of Faith. Now, we have had evidence this day, from Professor Smith’s own statement, that he admits, as fully and unequivocally as any of us, the Divine element. Some may think that he gave a little too much latitude to the human, and I may be of that opinion myself, but I am bound to say that the opinion of Professor Smith, with reference to this matter, is more consistent with the facts of the case than that mechanical kind of theory of inspiration, which is ever cropping up, and has been cropping up this evening again, and which, as has been remarked, would make the inspired writers not so much the *penmen*, as the *pen* in the hand of the Divine Spirit. Let it also be borne in mind by the Assembly, that if Professor Smith does give a little freer play to the human element in the production of the sacred writings, than some of us may have been accustomed to, he stands in the same position, in this respect, as some of the soundest and most honoured names in the Christian Church. The libel is founded, not upon any work of Professor Smith specifically dealing with the subject of inspiration, but on certain criticisms on the Book of Chronicles—criticisms which, I venture to say, are comparatively harmless. There is another consideration to which I hope the Assembly will give all proper weight. We are not dealing at present with a question of dogmatic

theology upon which the opinion of the Church may be pretty well matured. The science of Biblical criticism is comparatively new. The Church of Christ is in a somewhat transition state in relation to that subject, and I take it upon me to say, that it would be a most unwise thing for our Church, or any other Church, to take up a position in regard to this question of Biblical criticism from which they might afterwards have to resile. It would be a most unguarded thing for us to lay down beforehand certain lines within which we are always to be confined, and beyond which we dare not advance on pain of deposition. I think it would strengthen rather than endanger the faith of our Christian people, by showing that we can allow frank and honest criticism of the books of Scripture without being greatly afraid of the result."

Before going to the vote, Dr. William Wilson, Clerk of Assembly, whose opinions are always heard with respect, stated—

"That he must support Mr. Isdale's motion—although he had voted with Sir H. Moncreiff in the forenoon—because the first motion appeared to him to limit the freedom which certainly all the authors of the Sacred Scriptures had in the exercise of their mind, under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit, following the bent of their faculties, and using the educational means which were within their reach. He knew no doctrine of inspiration which interfered with the fact that authors of Scripture did use, in the composition of these books, their natural faculties with as much freedom as any of the ancient or modern historians did, the superintendence of the Spirit securing that there was no error, and that God meant what He communicated through these men to be read as communicated from Himself."

The result of the vote being intimated, Principal Brown of Aberdeen, one of the minority of the Presbytery, induced his fellow-dissentients to withdraw the remaining dissents and complaints, one of which was against a judgment of the Presbytery refusing to consider the libel as a whole.

When things had come to this stage, some of Professor Smith's supporters were sanguine enough to hope that one of the leading men on the other side might, looking to the *majus bonum ecclesiæ*, have proposed that the case should now take end, and that the Professor, after solemn admonition from the Moderator to be more cautious in future, should be reinstated in the chair from which he had been debarred for twelve months of painful anxiety and suspense. This was not done. The main difficulty arose, of course, from the circumstance that *secundo* had been carried by a majority of the House, small though that majority was.

After much able discussion, in the course of which Principal Rainy pointed out, in a very felicitous and pointed manner, the danger and inconvenience of proceeding upon the alternative charge of tendency,—as some desired,—when a libel turned out to be irrelevant, it was ultimately moved and agreed to, that the libel should be amended in accordance with the finding, as respects the second branch of

the *major* proposition, and the corresponding *minor*, such alterations being made in other parts as might be necessary, to give consistency to the entire document. After considerable trouble this was effected; the Assembly approved of the amended libel, and remitted to the Presbytery of Aberdeen to proceed with the case according to the laws of the Church, and in conformity with the Assembly's judgment.

Another year passed, and the case came up to the General Assembly of 1879 hardly more advanced than it had been twelve months before, and embarrassed with a new weight of personal feeling and soreness, generated by inaccuracies, by misunderstandings, and by the heart-sickness of hope deferred. Is this to be wondered at? The Presbytery by a large majority had all along supported the gentleman under libel; they were cognisant of all that had taken place in former Assemblies, and it was hardly reasonable to expect them to prove the amended libel, which, in their eyes, was nearly as irrelevant as its predecessor. The minority also were inflexible in *their* sentiments, and could do nothing else but refer the whole case to the Superior Court by means of dissents, complaints, and references.

After much preliminary discussion and hearing of

parties at the bar in regard to these dissents, complaints, and references, this result emerged from the confusion, which at one time was very perplexing, that the libel was limited to the Deuteronomy count, the second particular of the first alternative charge which had been carried against Professor Smith the year before—we remember under what exceptional circumstances.

The ex-Moderator, Dr. Andrew Bonar, proposed the following motion, which was seconded by Mr. Bannerman, Dalkeith :—

“That the General Assembly instruct the Presbytery of Aberdeen to meet and take immediate steps to have the libel, as regards the second particular of the first alternative charge, served in due form upon Professor Smith ; they also instruct the Presbytery, in the event of their finding the libel sustained, either by the admission of Professor Smith or by adequate proof, to suspend him from his functions, professorial, ministerial, and judicial, till the next meeting of Assembly ; and the Assembly now appoint a Committee to adjust the libel in this view, excluding from it all parts that are not now applicable, and to report at a future diet of this Assembly.”

Principal Rainy proposed another motion, which was seconded by Mr. Henderson of Devanha :—

“ Having respect to the novelty and perplexity of this case in certain of its aspects, the serious difference of opinion that prevails throughout the Church regarding it, and the gravity of the consequences which the disposal of it may involve



the General Assembly resolve, before proceeding further with the libel, to appoint a Committee fairly representative of the Church, with powers, if they see cause, to confer with Professor Smith, directing them to consider the case in all its bearings, with the view of ascertaining the best means of arriving at a result honouring to the truth of God and fitted to secure, as far as can be, all the weighty interests which are at stake, and to report to next General Assembly."

Surely this latter motion, considering the whole history of the case, and the growing support accorded to Professor Smith in successive Assemblies, considering also the recognised scriptural mode, so clearly announced, of dealing with a brother under any charge, might reasonably have been expected to secure general acceptance. But no; the result was otherwise: 319 members voted for Dr. Bonar's motion, 318 for Dr. Rainy's.

Dr. Rainy and others dissented for the following reasons:—

"I dissent because the case was reduced to a single charge; and when the relevancy was found by so small a majority (23 in a house of 579), and in so special a form, it was the duty of the Assembly, in the interests alike of the peace of the Church, the justice of the cause, and the influence of discipline on the maintenance of sound doctrine, to take the course suggested in the rejected motion, as most likely to conduce to unite the Church, and to exert a happy influence on the whole case."

Three days after the decision of the Assembly Mr.

David Maclagan, who had voted for Dr. Bonar's motion, opened a door for much possible good by standing up in his place and expressing his belief that many as well as himself would receive, in a spirit of conciliation and fairness, any new light which may arise, any statements which may be made by Professor Smith or others, explanatory or otherwise, at any subsequent stage in the anxious and solemn matter before them.

In common with Mr. Maclagan, the present writer is fully aware that much earnest prayer has been made on both sides for light and guidance, and he cannot but entertain the hope, that a pamphlet recently published by Professor Smith on the present aspect of his case may greatly tend towards bringing about that mutual confidence and good feeling which all desiderate and pray for. The pamphlet was brought into existence on this wise: The libel having been *re-amended* by the Assembly, Mr. Smith reasonably felt that the answer which he had formerly addressed to the Presbytery of Aberdeen was no longer appropriate, and that as his prosecutors had re-stated their charge, he ought to be allowed to re-state his answer to it. He therefore prepared the document referred to, and laid it before that Court on the 1st of July. It is unnecessary to mention all that took place then and subsequently.

It is sufficient to say that the Presbytery did not consider the libel relevant, even in its re-amended form, and that the Case will again come up to the Assembly of 1880, possibly, or perhaps probably, for final judgment.

Much may depend therefore on the impression produced throughout the bounds of the Church by the pamphlet in question, containing Professor Smith's mature answer to the libel, which is now restricted to what may be called the Deuteronomy charge.

Like all his other writings, this answer<sup>1</sup> indicates great ability, an admirable faculty of clear expression, with ripe scholarship and learning. The field over which it expatiates being more limited than formerly, non-professional readers will find it more intelligible; and we venture to hope that fair and reasonable minds, on reading it, will begin to feel and admit that the causes for anxiety and alarm are really less formidable than they had imagined. To enter into any detail regarding the points discussed would be quite incompatible with the limits of this paper, not to mention the risk of marring the concentrated effect of the author's carefully-conducted argument; we therefore content ourselves with recommending the "Answer" as it stands, to the prayerful attention of our readers.

<sup>1</sup> Answer to the Amended Libel, with Appendix containing Plea in Law. Edinburgh, David Douglas, 9 Castle Street, 1879.

In what remains of our space we shall devote a few sentences, in the first place, to the young Professor himself, who has been the unwilling cause of all this commotion in the ecclesiastical courts, and all this panic among the members and adherents of our Church. In the second place, we shall consider one or two phases of opinion which seem to underlie and account for the very notable antagonism in regard to the Aberdeen Case which at present divides the Church, and which appears in one party condemning the same person as keenly as the other vindicates him. Lastly, we shall suggest a few reasons for terminating this Case at next Assembly, without pressing it to the bitter end either of deposition or of continued withholding of confidence.

1. William Robertson Smith is the son of an able and accomplished minister of the Free Church, who still labours effectively in his Master's service. He enjoyed many educational advantages while an inmate of his early home; and in due time was sent to Aberdeen University, where he became a distinguished student in every branch of the Arts course, both literary and scientific. He then entered the Divinity Hall of the Free Church in Edinburgh, bringing with him a high reputation, which suffered

no diminution, but the reverse, during each successive year of his theological curriculum. His contemporaries—the best of all judges—regarded him as indisputably their foremost man, and augured for him a very distinguished career in his future profession ; while more than one of the eminent men who fill scientific chairs in the University would gladly have monopolised him for their special departments. But early religious convictions and a growing seriousness and spirituality of mind kept him loyal to his purpose of becoming a preacher of the Gospel.

In 1870, while yet a student, and barely twenty-four years of age, he was appointed by the General Assembly Professor of Hebrew and of Old Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College, Aberdeen. With the ardour of youth, and true to his bright antecedents, he straightway applied himself to the studies and academic duties expected from the occupant of a chair so important and onerous—a chair for which his previous training, his natural abilities, and his tastes, obviously fitted him in a pre-eminent degree. Everything seemed to indicate that the right man was in the right place. His students were proud of him. They justly held him in the highest estimation, animated and fired as they were by the vitality and earnestness which pervaded his teaching. He preached with great

acceptance in the pulpits of Aberdeen, of Edinburgh, and other places, both town and country; he heartily undertook evangelistic work in his University city, and won the confidence and esteem of many who witnessed the zeal and Christian earnestness with which these labours were performed. He wrote largely on topics connected with Biblical criticism, and was chosen by the proprietors of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* to furnish articles on kindred subjects, *au courant* of the time, for their new forthcoming edition. We know the result; and the circumstances have been already explained which led to the present melancholy confusion.

Professor Smith has been accused of being disrespectful and irreverent towards some of his opponents in the present controversy, whose position, attainments, and years, entitle them to deference and respect. But if there be any truth in this somewhat irrelevant and trifling accusation, it must still be remembered that everything chiefly valuable to such a man has been in jeopardy for several years; that his youth is passing away while his life-work is in abeyance; that conclusions, which to him appear obvious, have been misapprehended, misrepresented, even caricatured, by men whose smaller attainments in scholarship and learning virtually incapacitate them for controverting these

conclusions in an authoritative manner. It is not easy for an accurate incisive thinker like Professor Smith—thoroughly equipped for meeting the adverse criticism of rationalistic writers—to listen with patience to the reasonings of men of his own Church and Creed, who do not appreciate the difficulties that really exist, and who seem to fancy that safety is secured by ignoring them altogether. At a time like this, when every opinion in science, no less than in theology, is on its trial, there can be neither wisdom nor safety in silencing discussion and forbidding thorough investigation; and can any reasonable man wonder, if a Professor still young, such as we have described him, and contending, so to speak, *pro aris et focis*, should occasionally express himself, in the heat of debate, with considerable sharpness and severity?

2. Let us now examine, as concisely as possible, some of those fundamental disparities of opinion or sentiment which may help to explain the very antagonistic attitude of those who either condemn or support Mr. Smith in his contention. I write, not as a trained theologian, but as a humble office-bearer of the Church, who looks upon the Bible as *throughout* the inspired Word of God, and upon the Westminster Confession of Faith as the carefully

prepared and mature expositor of the Bible in all vital and important doctrines.

(1.) The Confession of Faith informs us that “it pleased the Lord, at sundry times and in divers manners, to reveal Himself and to declare that His will (*i.e.* His will, the knowledge of which is necessary to salvation) unto the Church ; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing, which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary ; those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.” It goes on to enumerate all the Canonical Books of both the Old and the New Testament, but is silent, absolutely silent, as to the authorship of these books, and it expresses no opinion as to the mode in which the human writers were enabled by the Holy Spirit to perform their task.

Every attentive and observant reader of the Bible must perceive the charming variety of style which characterises it, indicating, as we may reasonably infer, that the human agents, while guided and preserved from error, in all they wrote, by the Divine Spirit, were permitted to manifest spontaneously their own intellectual and moral peculiarities. If this were



not so, how many striking evidences would be lost to us of the genuineness and authenticity of the several books! The idea generally held at one time, and still by not a few, that every word in the sacred writings is the result of immediate dictation, irrespective of all individual characteristics of the human penman, seems to be untenable, and would have the injurious effect of practically denuding the words of God to man of many of their most winning attractions.

(2.) There is a cognate question which we have no wish to mix up with that of inspiration, but which needs to be considered among the other discrepancies of opinion that seem to underlie the present controversy; we allude to the true text of Scripture. All scholars and theologians recognise the existence of various readings, and, in particular passages, the difficulty of establishing the true text. These are neither numerous nor, generally speaking, important, for there is a wonderful *consensus* as to the sacred text, a *consensus* arrived at after careful and reverential collation of ancient manuscripts. This comparison of such documents necessarily implies that some differences of opinion, on this matter of the true text, must be tolerated; but if Scripture be honestly and ingenuously compared with Scripture, no substantial doubt can exist in an unprejudiced mind, as to any single doctrine of our common faith. Some

people, however, are found who shrink from admitting the possibility of various readings in a book, every sentence, and word, and syllable of which is, as they hold, the result of direct immediate Divine dictation. This might almost be anticipated, and is quite in accordance with their theory of inspiration. We doubt if it is a sound view and compatible with stern realities, or a view that can be wisely enforced in a high-handed way, at this time, when a tendency to doubt is so manifestly in the moral atmosphere.

(3.) There seems to be some confusion of thought prevailing at present on the subject of true faith in the Word of God. We are apt to forget that no one can thoroughly accept the Bible, in the character of God's Word, unless his soul has been prepared for that reception of it by the Spirit of God, the Divine Author of the Book. This is admirably brought out in the following splendid passage of our venerable Confession :—

“We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; *yet, notwithstanding,*

*our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and Divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts."*

The clause in *italics* deserves to be seriously pondered, for some, who evidently consider themselves specially called to defend the Bible, have raised a panic by declaring that its authority is endangered by the processes and results of modern criticism. These alarmists may keep their minds at rest. The Bible will again come forth, as it has often done before, undamaged by this threatening storm. No believer, in whom the Holy Spirit has borne witness by and with the Word, will be shaken from his faith; and all others, if we only think of it, can have no stable ground to rest upon, until the same Divine work has been accomplished in them also by the same quickening Spirit. The *external* evidences that the Bible is the word of God—those mentioned first in the paragraph quoted from the Confession—have their own weight; but the *internal* evidence alone supplies the believer with a palladium of which no power can dispossess him, and with a citadel in which he cannot be assailed. Dr. Chalmers used to call this latter "the portable evidence"—that evidence for his faith which a man carries about with him in his own bosom.

Now this doctrine differs *toto cælo* from that

which some defenders of orthodoxy hold up to condemnation at the present time. They misrepresent it entirely. They accuse their opponents of asserting that those portions alone of the Bible are to be received which tally with a man's own experience and convictions of truth. Of course such an averment is a phase of infidelity, and merits condemnation. But to confound it with the high and spiritual view propounded by the Confession of Faith is to misrepresent and even caricature those who, regarding the Bible as throughout the Word of the living God, hold that there are difficulties and *apparent* inconsistencies in some portions of it which may be safely and reverently subjected to the methods of modern criticism, while their own faith in the whole volume continues undisturbed.

(4.) Critical inquiries, such as those which have involved Professor Smith in his present trouble, are represented as rash, uncalled-for, dangerous, unprofitable. They can lead, it is said, to no good result, and only tend to unsettle the minds of humble Christians who know the way of salvation and are walking in it. Two answers may be given to these allegations:—(i.) If there are difficulties and apparent contradictions of statement known to scholars familiar with the original tongues of Scripture, while ordinary readers are in happy ignorance of their

existence, it is surely desirable—nay, necessary—to have these inquired into, and if possible explained, were it for no other reason than to shut the mouths of gainsayers and sceptics. Such persons are swift to discover and make the most of anything that seems to oppose or invalidate the Word of God, and it is not creditable, it is cowardly, for the friends of the Bible to evade inquiry when such challenges are thrown down; (ii.) Truth—as truth—is always valuable, whatever be the topic under consideration. The discovery of it invariably confirms what we already know, and it not seldom opens the way and widens the horizon of vision towards new and still greater attainments. This being the case as regards the works of God, are we justified in overlooking it when called, under the guidance and illumination of His Spirit, to investigate His Word?

An illustration occurs which may commend the view we are trying to establish. Towards the close of last century Sir William Herschel, the great astronomer, discovered a new planet, now known as *Uranus* or the *Georgium Sidus*. It was soon observed by himself and others that the orbit of this planet was subject to a certain amount of perturbation. To explain the cause of this became a question of absorbing interest with astronomers. Telescopes were perseveringly turned towards the

barely-visible planet whenever hopeful opportunities occurred for seeing it, and calculations of the most elaborate kind were made. Years passed, but the absolute faith of these philosophers in the eternal laws of the universe continued unshaken, although as yet no adequate discovery had rewarded their perseverance. At length, after half a century of unrequited labour, two astronomers—Adams in England, and Leverrier on the Continent—simultaneously descried another planet, now called *Neptune*, whose proximity to *Uranus* at one point of its orbit indubitably furnished the long-desiderated answer to their inquiry. All the time during which this fact had escaped human observation and intelligence, men went to their labour in the morning and lay down on their beds at night wholly unaffected by the unknown secret, and yet by this discovery an attainment was made in human knowledge which not only confirmed previous inductions, but doubtless encouraged and braced the brotherhood of astronomers for new and still wider investigations.

Many worthy persons, naturally enough, would wonder at all the time spent and the trouble taken by these astronomers in discovering a secret which had no apparent bearing on the welfare and happiness of the human race, and many have the same opinion now regarding the processes and results

of Biblical criticism. But as the experts in astronomical science had sufficient faith in the universality of the law of gravitation to prosecute with unabated energy their self-imposed task, so, in like manner, the experts in Biblical research repose equal if not greater faith in the absolute consistency and perfection of God's holy Word; and we can see no reason why they should be prevented from working quietly and persistently at the problems which now perplex them. There *are* difficulties—perturbations let us call them—which common readers cannot see, even when told that they exist. But only give the critics time and freedom from disturbance, and a master key may yet be discovered, ere long, capable of unlocking to general satisfaction the *arcana*, not only of Deuteronomy, but of other perplexing portions of the sacred volume.

It is probable that neither Professor Smith, nor any other of his believing fellow-workers in the field of Biblical criticism, has, as yet, made a discovery which admits of no challenge; but instead of being discouraged and threatened with ecclesiastical censures, we think that these gentlemen deserve commendation for their diligent performance of duty, and for their aspirations, animated by faith in the uniform truth and consistency of God's Word, after fresh discoveries in Biblical criticism.

3. Let us now adduce a few reasons for dealing with what still remains of the Aberdeen Case in a spirit of tenderness, of conciliation, of generosity, of self-denial on both sides of the House, in the coming General Assembly of 1880.

Misunderstandings have manifestly existed from the commencement, and imagined dangers have been so exaggerated, that a panic has seized many minds, which circumstances have not tended to allay.

We have had too much ecclesiastical discussion, and too little calm, brotherly, prayerful conference. In self-defence, as we saw, Professor Smith demanded a libel ; and during the three intervening years there has been no opportunity for that quiet, reasonable dealing with him which is so desirable. A man under libel, let us remember, cannot, in the nature of things, commit himself in confidential intercourse to those who are seeking to bring the libel to a judicial decision.

Is it necessary then for the Supreme Court of our Church, composed as it is of Christian men, and after all that has already emerged in this case, to insist on carrying it on to judgment and the bitter end of deposition ? The last General Assembly, as we saw, was almost equally divided on the question at issue. Is there no call upon us, in that view, to



proceed with generosity and largeness of heart? Might not a regard to their own personal consistency, on the part of individuals, be merged in the common good? Might not peace be restored in our Church, and this still youthful Professor, after due and solemn but kindly admonition, be reposed in his much-loved position, and be sent back to the ingenuous students who have been looking for him so long, with the sanguine hopefulness of youth?<sup>1</sup>

There is reason to fear that if hard extremities shall be resorted to in this case, the Free Church of Scotland may discover, at no distant date, that she has committed a blunder. It is possible, that a luminous generalisation, reached by some gifted mind, may make it clear beyond dispute, that Professor Smith is, even now, on the proper line of inquiry, and not far from a discovery. Were this to happen, what would be the position of this Church, with all its splendid history and its present salutary influence, both at home and throughout the world?

<sup>1</sup> Of course the procedure pointed at would need to be carried out with strict regard to ecclesiastical forms; but that would be no difficult task to men versed in these matters, and impressed with the supreme importance of the end in view. Even in Civil Courts, the presiding Judge sometimes recommends an action to be summarily compromised or abandoned, for the sake of peace and other social reasons. Is there no analogous mode of bringing cases to an end, in a Court of Christ's house, without pressing them to a judicial decision?

Would it be desirable, when the gentleman at the bar evidently carries the sympathy of so many ministers and elders of the Church, to take a step, if by any means it can be avoided, which must awaken an extensive conviction that liberty and independence of thought are in danger of being violated ?

For these reasons surely, the Assembly will lean, if possible, to the side of forbearance, and resolve to bring the case to an end, in the large-hearted manner we have ventured to suggest. May we add,—not as a reason, but as a further encouragement to this course,—that we may be very thankful as a Church, that up to this time no heresy, properly so called, has appeared within our borders ; that in God's providence, we have arrived, in very hopeful circumstances, at the Jubilee of our Foreign Mission enterprise ; and that, by a rare coincidence, we shall unite, before the Assembly meets, in commemorating the centenary of Thomas Chalmers—a name to conjure with, and still fragrant in the memory of all Free Churchmen of every shade of opinion ? Do not all these circumstances combined summon us to a course of conciliation and of peace ? In this attitude, as a united Church, we may humbly cherish the hope that our Divine Head may give us once more, in His

sovereign mercy, a new season of quickening, revival, and refreshing from His presence,—“opening on us the windows of Heaven, and pouring us out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”



## APPENDIX.

### THE LIBEL AS NOW AMENDED.

“Mr. William Robertson Smith, Professor of Oriental Languages and Exegesis of the Old Testament at Aberdeen, you are indicted and accused, at the instance of the Free Presbytery of Aberdeen :—

“That whereas the publishing and promulgating of opinions which contradict or are opposed to the doctrine of the immediate inspiration, infallible truth, and Divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, or any part or parts thereof, as set forth in the Scriptures themselves, and in the Confession of Faith, is an offence, especially in a Professor of Divinity, which calls for such censure or other judicial sentence as may be found adequate ; and more particularly,

“Albeit that the book of inspired Scripture called Deuteronomy, which is professedly an historical record, does not possess that character, but was made to assume it by a writer of a much later age, who therein, in the name of God, presented, in dramatic form, instructions and laws as proceeding from the mouth of Moses, though these never were and never could have been uttered by him.

“And albeit this opinion contradicts, or is opposed to, the doctrine of the immediate inspiration, infallible truth, and Divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, as set forth in the Scriptures themselves, and in the Confession of Faith as aforesaid.

“Yet true it is, and of verity, that you, the said Mr. William Robertson Smith, are guilty of the said offence, in so far as you, the said Mr. William Robertson Smith, have published and promulgated, or concurred in the publishing and promulgating, the following article and remarks, of which you are the author, *videlicet*, the article ‘BIBLE’ in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and also ‘Remarks’ by Professor William Robertson Smith on a memorandum of the Sub-Committee on the article ‘BIBLE’ in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, published in the College Committee’s Report to the General Assembly; which publications, being to be used in evidence against you, are lodged in the hands of the Clerk of Presbytery, that you may have an opportunity of seeing the same; of which article and remarks you have acknowledged yourself to be the author to the said Presbytery of Aberdeen, at its meeting held there on the twelfth day of April, eighteen hundred and seventy-seven. More particularly, and without prejudice to the same generality,—

“You, the said Mr. William Robertson Smith, in the aforesaid article ‘BIBLE,’ published in the aforesaid edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, expressed yourself at page 637*b*, as follows, *videlicet*:—‘Now the Book of Deuteronomy presents a quite distinct type of style, which, as has been already mentioned, recurs from time to time in passages of the later books, and that in such a connection as to suggest to many critics since Graf the idea that the Deuteronomic hand is the hand of the last editor of the whole history from Genesis to Kings, or at least of the non-Levitical parts thereof. This conclusion is not stringent, for a good deal may be said in favour of the view, that the Deuteronomic style, which is very capable of imitation, was adopted by writers of different periods.

But even so it is difficult to suppose that the legislative part of Deuteronomy is as old as Moses. If the law of the kingdom in Deuteronomy xvii. was known in the time of the Judges, it is impossible to comprehend Judges viii. 23, and above all 1 Samuel viii. 7. That the law of high places, given in this part of the Pentateuch, was not acknowledged till the time of Josiah, and was not dreamed of by Samuel and Elijah, we have already seen. The Deuteronomic law is familiar to Jeremiah, the younger contemporary of Josiah, but is referred to by no prophet of earlier date. And the whole theological stand-point of the book agrees exactly with the period of prophetic literature, and gives the highest and most spiritual view of the law to which our Lord himself directly attaches his teaching, and which cannot be placed at the beginning of the theoretic development without making the whole history unintelligible. Beyond doubt the book is, as already hinted, a prophetic legislative programme, and if the author put his work in the mouth of Moses instead of giving it, with Ezekiel, a directly prophetic form, he did so not in pious fraud, but simply because his object was, not to give a new law, but to expound and develop Mosaic principles in relation to new needs. And as ancient writers are not accustomed to distinguish historical data from historical deductions, he naturally presents his views in dramatic form in the mouth of Moses.' As also, in your said 'Remarks or Memorandum of the Sub-Committee on the article 'BIBLE,' you expressed yourself as follows, *videlicet*, page 20 :—'When my position is thus discriminated from the theories of those who, like Kuenen, ascribe the origin of Deuteronomy to a pious fraud, I do not think that it will be found to involve any more serious innovation in our conception of the method of revelation than this: that the written record of the revelation of God's will which is necessary unto

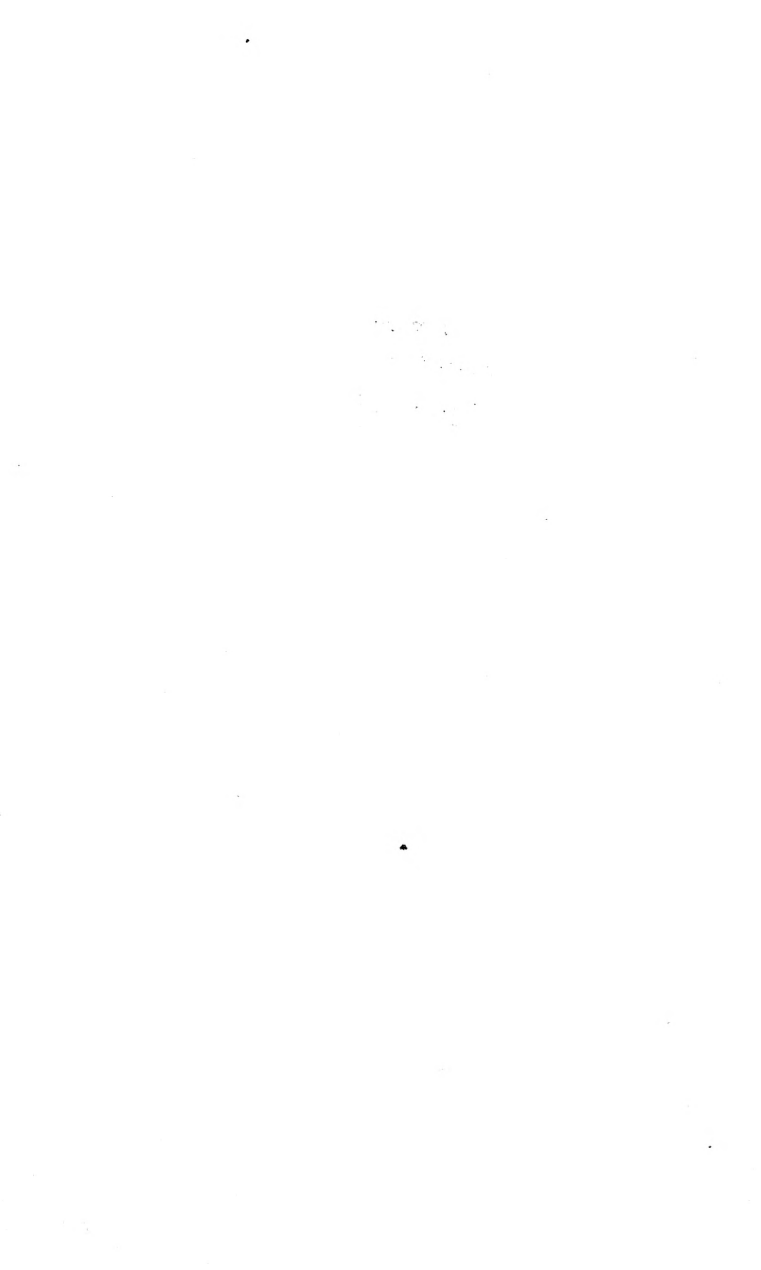
salvation, makes use of certain forms of literary presentation which have always been thought legitimate in ordinary composition, but which were not always understood to be used in the Bible.' And at page 21 of the said 'Remarks,' you expressed yourself thus :—'It is asked whether our Lord does not bear witness to the Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy. If this were so, I should feel myself to be on very dangerous and untenable ground. But it appears to me that only a very strained Exegesis can draw any inference of authorship from the recorded words of our Saviour.' All which, or part thereof, being found proven against you, the said William Robertson Smith, by the said Free Presbytery of Aberdeen, before which you are to be tried, or being admitted by your own judicial confession, you, the said Mr. William Robertson Smith, ought to be subjected to such sentence as the gravity of the case, the rules and discipline of the Church, and the usage observed in such cases, may require for the glory of God, the edification of the Church, and the deterring of others holding the same sacred office from committing the like offences in all time coming."





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