

William Robertson Smith (1846-1894)

Local Legends
Alford Heritage Museum

biblical & Arabic scholar & scientist

William Robertson Smith was born at New Farm, Keig and was educated at home. His father was Free Church minister of Keig and Tough parishes. Good conversation, debate and wide reading tastes were encouraged amongst family members. The young boy and his brother George both received bursaries in 1861 to attend Aberdeen University.

In 1866 he left home to attend the Free Church Theological College in Edinburgh to train for the ministry. Whilst there, he travelled to Germany where he studied Hebrew, German and mathematics and experienced a wider range of Christian practices, and found to his dismay that the Sabbath Day was not strictly observed as in Scotland.



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In 1870, in spite of his youth and relative inexperience, he was appointed to the Free Church College in Aberdeen (Christ's College, Alford Place) as Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis. Although committed to a life of religious teaching, Smith had wider interests, writing scientific papers and developing an interest in social anthropology, particularly of middle eastern societies, and learning Arabic.

At this time, biblical scholarship was still rare in Scotland. Smith believed in the importance of critical reading of the scriptures by those who believed in them. His reputation led to him being invited in 1875 to contribute articles to the Encyclopaedia Britannica. In these, his approach to the examination of the traditional views of the origin and composition of the Biblical books brought him into conflict with the Free Church who felt that Smith's unorthodox views and "statements of a dangerous and unsettling tendency" as expressed in these articles were incompatible with

his position as a teacher of future ministers. The church General Assembly suspended Smith from his role as professor.

Subsequent church trials took place between 1877 and 1880. Initially merely admonished for his views, his later writings on Hebrew language and literature were once again seized upon by his opponents and a further case against him resulted in his removal from his post as Professor.

Public interest in Smith's trials was immense. He had many supporters and was in great demand as a speaker, his lectures in Glasgow and Edinburgh attracting hundreds. He was offered the post of joint editor of the Encyclopaedia Britannica which he accepted.



In 1883 he was appointed Reader in Arabic at Cambridge University. There he wrote many papers and books on Arabic and Semitic history, many of which are still in print today. By 1892 he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis of the spine. Although he continued to work, his health was now in a state of decline and he died on March 30th 1894. He was buried in Keig churchyard along with other members of his family.

Bible, in ecclesiastical Greek [as in Chrysostom] τὰ βιβλία. the [divine] books, in barbarous Latin *Biblia*, Gen. ac, is the collective title, synonymous with the older term *scripture*, *scriptures* [ἱερὰ γράμματα, ἱερὰ βιβλία, Rom. 2:13; 2 Peter 3:16 etc.], for the sacred books of Christendom: comprising the records of the religion of revelation in its pre-Christian and Christian stages, or in the language of the Bible itself under the Old & New Covenants (Jer. xxxi. 31, Matt. 26:28). Under the influence of the old Latin version no say Testament instead of *Covenant* & thus the full title, *Books* (records) of the Old & New Covenant (*Dispensation*) is shrouded into a form from which the English reader is apt to think of the Bible as itself a statement or testament addressed by God to man. The Bible may be viewed either from a purely theological standpoint (as is done in the dogmatic system), or from the standpoint of literary and historical criticism. The two views are not mutually exclusive, the theology has sometimes formulated the divine authority of Scripture in a way that excludes all human spontaneity on the part of the writers & forbids the application to the Bible of any of the ordinary laws of criticism and exegesis. The Reformation this needed view, though not quite obsolete even among Protestants, is steadily trampled only on the medieval conception of the word of God as a supernatural communication of intellectual (noetic) truths too high for unaided reason, and is virtually condemned as soon as the Reformer's *inspiration* is taken to mean a personal *revelation* of God with man, such in the Bible a personal revelation of the heart & will of God to man calling forth in those to whom it came the answer of a personal faith. This new & living conception of the word of God led at once to the well known Protestant principle that the Bible is to be interpreted by itself.

Facsimile of a cancelled draft of opening paragraphs of article Bible.