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William Robertson Smith's Early Work on Prophecy and the Beginnings of Social Anthropology

Joachim Schaper

In 1882, William Robertson Smith published a volume called *The Prophets of Israel and their Place in History to the Close of the Eighth Century BC*, a book which grew out of a series of lectures given in Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1881–2 and summed up his research on prophecy up to that point.[1] I intend to explore Smith's understanding of prophecy, but would like to do so on the basis of his *earliest* known work on the Hebrew prophets, a number of essays, lectures and a review article on contemporary Continental scholarship on prophecy, all of them published, in 1912, by John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal in their volume *Lectures & Essays of William Robertson Smith*.[2] My aim in looking at this material is to sketch how Smith approaches one of the key topics in Old Testament research and simultaneously to locate him in the early history of social anthropology, since Smith is perceived by many as being one of the founding fathers of the discipline.

Why is the material interesting, and why is it relevant to historians of Old Testament studies and of anthropological research? Because it shows Smith in the earliest phase of his academic career, with his understanding of Israelite prophecy developing in a constant struggle with the new biblical criticism on the one hand and with the questions posed by what we now call the social sciences and psychology, on the other. The former asked challenging questions on the literary and historical planes, the latter cast a cold eye on religious experience and the human mind.[3] The former challenge emerged from the continent of Europe, the latter was 'home-grown'. Then, of course, there was the theological and ecclesiastical tradition from which Smith came and which had introduced him to the study of prophecy. Smith did his work in the field of force spread out between all those coordinates, and that field was highly charged indeed.

[1] W. R. Smith, *The Prophets of Israel and their Place in History to the Close of the Eighth Century BC*, Edinburgh: Black, 1882 (second edition: London: Black, 1995).

[2] J. S. Black and G. Chrystal (eds.), *Lectures & Essays of William Robertson Smith* (London: Black, 1912).

[3] For an impression of the intellectual climate of the time, with special regard to (proto-) anthropological studies, cf. R. Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 35–52.

What was Smith's starting-point? What forced him into devoting so much effort to the understanding of prophecy, as opposed to other areas of Israelite literature and religion? The titles of the articles collected in *Lectures & Essays* give us some indication: 'Prophecy and Personality', 'The Question of Prophecy in the Critical Schools of the Continent', 'The Fulfilment of Prophecy', 'Prophecy as a Factor in History', and 'Was the Prophetic Inspiration Supernatural?'. It is the relation between the individual and the deity, and between history and revelation, which intrigues Smith and which lets him see the prophetic literature of Israel – and not, say, the Pentateuch – as the most remarkable part of the Israelite heritage. He writes:

> Of all the monuments of Israel's history, the most precious by far to the critical student are the Old Testament prophecies, witnessing as they do to the inner life of the noblest and truest Israelites, representing at once the purest religious conceptions and the deepest national feelings that these ages could show.[4]

At the very beginning of the fragment on 'Prophecy and Personality', Smith formulates a thesis that encapsulates the paradox which sets his exploration of prophecy in motion: 'While it is true that history and prophecy alike are in all their parts the work of God, it is equally true that both in all their parts are products of human personality.'[5] Smith devotes the rest of his essay – which was penned in January 1868, when Smith was 21 years old, and remained a fragment – to demonstrating that his thesis may be paradoxical, but is not nonsensical. In order to do so, he feels that he has to engage with the psychology of his day.

Smith's view of the mind concurs with that of the idealists amongst the psychologists and philosophers of his day, such as James Ward, the psychologist, and Henry Jackson, the classicist, philosopher and eminent interpreter of Plato, both of whom later exercised great influence on James George Frazer.

In his famous article titled 'Psychology' in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, edited by William Robertson Smith, Ward argued against the empiricist and sensationalist trend of much of British psychology during that period, described by Robert Ackerman as 'the line of thought,

[4] W. R. Smith, 'On the Question of Prophecy in the Critical Schools of the Continent', in: J. S. Black and G. Chrystal (eds.), *Lectures & Essays* (cf. n. 2), 163 – 203 (at 166).

[5] W. R. Smith, 'Prophecy and Personality: A Fragment', in: J. S. Black and G. Chrystal (eds.), *Lectures & Essays* (cf. n. 2), 97 – 108 (at 97).

beginning with Locke and including Hartley, J. S. Mill, and Mill's follower Bain, that asserts that the mind is essentially a passive instrumentality that receives pictures of the world from stimuli that impinge on it (via the sensorium) through the action of the mechanisms of association and habit'.[6]

That Ward could take on that empiricist tradition is of course due, as Ackerman points out, to his being informed by the German idealist tradition, which he had imbibed when in Germany. As far as I can see, Ward's view of the mind ultimately goes back to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Smith was under that very same influence – he had been a diligent reader of Kant in his student days – and it is not surprising that he should have chosen Ward to write the *Britannica* contribution on 'Psychology'.

Smith engaged with the psychological research of his day because, in his own words,

> [i]t is not enough to say that the prophet is not a mere lyre struck by the plectrum of the spirit; to admit that the revelation was not only *through* the prophet but *to* the prophet, and so had to be intelligently apprehended by him before it could be given forth to others – this is not enough unless we carefully observe how much of real personal activity such an intelligent apprehension involves.[7]

It is clear at whom this note of caution is directed: the die-hard conservatives of his day, proponents of a mechanistic theory of inspiration that Smith, in spite of his full commitment to the Calvinism of the Free Church of Scotland, felt unable to support. This is how he refers to it:

> For many who claim to have risen above a mere mechanical theory of prophecy yet seem to think that what the Spirit presented to the prophet was a ready-made thought or a complete visionary picture of a purely objective kind which he was then able to lay hold of, embody in words, and utter.[8]

In order to provide his readers with a *reductio ad absurdum* of the mechanistic theory of inspiration favoured by so many of his contemporary fellow-Calvinists, Smith invokes, as we have heard, the insights of idealist psychologists who

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[6] R. Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer* (cf. n. 3), 40.

[7] W. R. Smith, 'Prophecy and Personality' (cf. n. 5), 97–98.

[8] Ibid., 98.

stressed the active participation of the observer in the act of perception. He points out 'that what appears to us as objective is really a product of personal activity acting on certain subjective elements'.[9] In doing so he demonstrates that he is *au fait* with the psychological debate of his day. Also, and much more importantly, he manages to establish a middle position between the mechanistic (and rather simplistic) doctrine of inspiration held by many of his brethren and the empiricist and materialist conception of the mind promoted by scholars in the tradition of John Stuart Mill and Alexander Bain. With the help of idealist conceptions of the mind in the Kantian tradition he is able to conceptualise the processes of the mind in such a way as to help him to cling to a heavily modified concept of revelation, but a concept of *revelation* nevertheless.

On the one hand, Smith stresses the active role of the human recipient, pointing out that 'the new thought' of the prophets is due to a 'conscious effort' and uses 'certain ideas and representative notions ("Begriffe" and "Vorstellungen") already present to the prophet's mind',[10] and this view goes back to the (rather radical) German Protestant theologian Richard Rothe. On the other hand, Smith hastens to point out that the capacity to come up with 'a new thought depends on man's spiritual nature', and that only the 'Spirit of God', acting upon the 'spirit of man', can enable that spiritual nature of man 'to correspond with the necessities of prophecy'.[11] Thus the concept of revelation, which had been shown out the front door, all of a sudden enters again through the back door. Should somebody then ask what exactly the process of revelation was like, Smith has the following answer:

> By what creative and inexplicable power God first wrought in the spirit of the prophet that sympathy with His own character which is the true characteristic of the prophetic life is a question for the theologian, not for the historian.[12]

Thus Smith, seeing himself as having refuted the criticism of historians and as having paved the way for theology, stops short of committing himself to a theological position on the matter of inspiration. Again we see him steering a middle course between the old dogmatic positions of the Westminster

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 107.
[11] Ibid., 107.
[12] W. R. Smith, 'On the Question of Prophecy' (cf. n. 4), 187.

confession and the empiricist stance of the mainstream of British psychology.

In all of this he concentrates exclusively on the mind of the individual and on what he perceives as the interaction between the deity and the prophet. He does not venture beyond the individual and into the realm of social organisation. In that he is quite representative of British mainstream biblical scholarship of the day.

All of this was to change when Smith met John Ferguson McLennan (1827–81) in Edinburgh on 29 October 1869. Their conversation on that day and on many later occasions alerted Smith to the importance of an anthropological scrutiny of Old Testament material with a view to deepening the understanding of the history of Israelite religion. The remarkable thing about McLennan's approach was that it was *not* psychologically orientated, and that it thus was very much unlike Smith's work on prophecy up to that point. As Peter Rivière put it in the paper he gave in Aberdeen during the memorial conference held by Professor William Johnstone in 1994,

> there remains an all-important point to make. This is to draw attention to McLennan's sociological approach. McLennan pursues his argument at the level of social institutions which have to be understood and explained in relation to one another. It is on the interrelationship between social forms that he builds his evolutionary framework and not on the biological or psychological characteristics of the individual.[13]

McLennan can indeed be called the first social anthropologist. Evans-Pritchard writes that he 'in a strict sense was the first major writer in the history of social anthropology, and in that sense its founder'.[14] It is the evolutionary approach advocated by McLennan which deeply appeals to Smith's taste, and which he from then on applies to his own reconstruction of the history of the religion of the Semites. I think that there is a very specific reason for this taking over of McLennan's key concept, and of McLennan's theory of totemism and its role in the development of religion. The reason behind this key decision made by Smith in the Seventies is that he perceived that evolutionism as coinciding with, as being co-extensive with, his–Smith's–concept of

[13] P. Rivière, 'William Robertson Smith and John Ferguson McLennan: The Aberdeen Roots of British Social Anthropology', in: W. Johnstone (ed.), *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment* (JSOTS 189) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 293–302 (at 296).

[14] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Foreword', in: T. O. Beidelman, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974), ix.

progressive revelation. Approaching the problem from both the scientific and the Christian theological angle, the net result was the same: What expressed itself in empirical social reality was the empirical witness to the underlying fact that God had set in motion a process of truth being revealed in human history. Smith saw it as 'a general law of human history that truth is consistent, progressive and imperishable'.[15] This perceived coincidence between the scientific evolutionism of McLennan in his key work on primitive marriage and the concept of revelation enabled Smith to accept McLennan's theory lock, stock and barrel.

Smith had responded, in his early work on prophecy, to the 'modernisation crisis' which his church, and the whole of British – and not just British – Protestantism, was undergoing at the time. He had desperately tried to bridge the gap between his church, which was opting for the religious outlook and intellectual arsenal of the seventeenth century (with a dose of nineteenth century religious fervour added in for good measure), and the prevalent agnosticism and materialism of the mainstream of Victorian scientific enquiry. For a few years he had found, at least for himself, the balance which he desired to establish. The German idealist philosophical tradition had helped him to find that balance. The problem was that the balance was illusory.

Once he had discovered the importance of the questions McLennan was asking Smith moved away from the exploration of prophecy and prophetic individuals and concentrated instead on questions that can properly be called anthropological, i.e. questions that concern institutions and social structures.

From the time of his meeting with McLennan in Edinburgh onwards he realised that the key to the understanding of the religion of the Semites, and thus to that of the Hebrews, was the exploration of their institutions and their social organisation, as opposed to speculation about the states of mind of a few individuals deemed to be their 'noblest and truest' representatives. Smith consequently ceased altogether working on prophecy; after 1885 – in which year his book on *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, the most important result of his interaction with McLennan's work, was published – he did not publish on prophecy ever again.

It is a tragic irony that the presumed insights of McLennan, which had triggered off Robertson Smith's work on kinship in early Arabia, were themselves as illusory as Smith's earlier balance between Calvinist dogmatism

[15] Quoted according to R. P. Carroll, 'The Biblical Prophets as Apologists for the Christian Religion: Reading William Robertson Smith's *The Prophets of Israel* today', in: W. Johnstone (ed.), *William Robertson Smith* (cf. n. 13), 148–57 (at 149).

and scientific materialism. The whole edifice of the theory of totemism and exogamy came crashing down in the twentieth century, and the rubble was cleared away by Lévi-Strauss. Wellhausen had become suspicious of the totemism theory early on, when Smith was still alive.

However, the obsession with totemism had provoked Smith to do groundbreaking work and to cast a new light not just on the Old Testament, but on the whole of the religious and social world of the Semitic peoples.

Yet again Smith did not content himself with the anthropological and historical insights he had won. Rather, he used these insights in order to produce a piece of Christian apologetics intended to make room for Christian belief again, and to do so *precisely on the basis of 'scientific'—i.e. historical and anthropological—insights*. It is the way in which Smith deals with the potential blow to theology delivered by anthropology that gives us a valuable insight into Smith's mind and his personality. I think it is fair to say that the *hidden* agenda of Smith's academic work was the refoundation of key theological concepts in a period that presented Christianity with formidable challenges. This becomes obvious from his attempt, at the end of his essay on animal worship, to deal with the potential embarrassment caused by the perceived existence of such worship—or at least of 'superstition of the totem kind', as Smith puts it[16]—in Israel, and indeed well into the exilic period, if not beyond. This is how he puts it:

> It is a favourite speculation that the Hebrews or the Semites in general have a natural capacity for spiritual religion. They are either represented as constitutionally monotheistic, or at least we are told that their worship had in it from the first, and apart from revelation, a lofty character from which spiritual ideas were easily developed. That was not the opinion of the prophets, who always deal with their nation as one peculiarly inaccessible to spiritual truths and possessing no natural merit which could form the ground of its choice as the people of Jehovah. Our investigations appear to confirm this judgment, and to show that the superstitions with which the spiritual religion had to contend were not one whit less degrading than those of the most savage nations.[17]

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[16] W. R. Smith, 'Animal Worship and Animal Tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament', in: J. S. Black and G. Chrystal (eds.), *Lectures & Essays*, 455–83 (at 481).

[17] W. R. Smith, 'Animal Worship and Animal Tribes', 483.

So Smith now defends the honour of the prophets *as opposed to* that of the mass of the Israelites. The prophets retain their place of honour, but now, given the anthropological insights he thinks he has won, he has to play down the significance of the Israelites *as a collective* in the history of religion. Ten years earlier Smith had put things very differently:

> The time is gone when the sources of the prophetic inspiration could be sought in an artificial aesthetical culture, in political intrigue, above all, in pious fraud. The starting-point in all critical study of prophecy lies in the acknowledgement that the prophetic writings are the true key to the marvellous religious development, which is, in fact, the kernel of all Israel's history.[18]

Thus, in 1870, Smith had thought the prophets were *representative* of that 'marvellous religious development', whereas in 1880 he held the view that the prophets were a lonely élite in a nation that was 'peculiarly inaccessible to spiritual truths and possessing no natural merit'.[19]

Of course, the more work Smith did, and the more he developed a unified interpretation of the evidence for the primitive religion of the Semites and its influence on later developments, the harder he had to work to leave, or indeed find, room for his defence of the truth of Christianity.

In the third chapter of his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, he delivers a particularly eloquent and elegant defence of a core concept of traditional Judaism and Christianity, a concept that was being acutely threatened by the pervasive materialism and immanentism of the scientific enquiry of his time. Having demonstrated that the religion of the Semites, like any other, necessarily had to have gone through a phase of totemism – 'that the Semites did pass through the totem stage', as he puts it[20] –, Smith says, addressing the contrast between Hebrew and other Semitic concepts of the deity:

> The burden of explaining this contrast does not lie with us: it falls on those who are compelled by a false philosophy of revelation to see in the Old Testament nothing more than the highest fruit of the general tendencies of Semitic religion. That is not the view that study

[18] W. R. Smith, 'On the Question of Prophecy', 166.

[19] W. R. Smith, 'Animal Worship and Animal Tribes' , 483.

[20] W. R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (Edinburgh: Black, 1889), 137.

> commends to me. It is a view that is not commended but condemned by the many parallelisms in detail between Hebrew and heathen story and ritual. For all these material points of resemblance only make the contrast in spirit the more remarkable.[21]

Smith thus leaves room for revelation, which is at the secret centre of his reconstruction of Semitic religion. Smith's earlier approach to prophecy, witnessed to by the lectures and essays I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, had been a dead end which, in a dialectical manner, led to the breakthrough which enabled Smith finally to interpret the Old Testament evidence from an anthropological perspective and simultaneously to defend the view that revelation was the decisive event in the development of Semitic religion from 'savage ritual and institutions of totem type'[22] to something else.

This view had already been foreshadowed in Smith's essay on 'Animal Worship and Animal Tribes' in 1880 when he wrote that '[i]t does not appear that Israel was, *by its own wisdom* (italics mine), more fit than any other nation to rise above the lowest level of heathenism'[23]—quite a statement, and quite shocking to the ears of the traditionalists. However, like the passage from the second series of the *Religion of the Semites* which I quoted,[24] it is intended to ensure one thing: the survival, in the church *and in scholarship*, of the concept of revelation.

What is the sum total of all of the above? Smith emerges as a scholar who, for a rather long time in his rather short life, expended much energy on defending scientifically the scientifically indefensible and on proving the scientifically unprovable. Unlike his good friend, Julius Wellhausen, he chose to opt for a third way between traditionalism and unfettered scholarly enquiry: Smith promoted and practised an approach that ultimately sees biblical studies as beholden to certain key doctrines, like a specific concept of revelation, and as serving the church.

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[21] W. R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: Second and Third Series, edited with an Introduction and Appendix by John Day* (JSOTS 183) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 112. The text can also be found, in slightly different form, in J. S. Black and G. Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London: Black, 1912), 536–7. It concludes the third and last course of the Burnett Lectures; the lecture was given on December 14, 1891.

[22] W. R. Smith, *Religion* (cf. n. 20), 138.

[23] W. R. Smith, 'Animal Worship and Animal Tribes', 483.

[24] Cf. above, n. 21.

Smith is universally extolled for his stance in the persecution wrought upon him by the Free Church of his time. However, the clichés employed by some colleagues who sing his praises are quite beside the point. Compare the following statement by Robert Carroll, written in 1995:

> As a biblical scholar living and working in contemporary Scotland I am all too familiar with the reactionary conservatism which drives the philistinism of current Presbyterian politics, so my sympathies are all with Smith in his crucifixion last century. 'Twas ever thus! The forces of reaction have tended to dominate the various forms of Christian religion since Herod and Pilate compounded to crucify the Jew Jesus.[25]

Things were not quite as clear-cut as Carroll assumed they were. The tragic irony of the matter was that Smith himself was a conservative, albeit a liberal one. And this is exactly why he got caught in the machinery of Free Church evangelical dogmatism. As so often happens, those who are closest to each other get involved in particularly unpleasant conflicts.

In the struggles raging in biblical scholarship in his day, Smith occupied a middle position between the radical approach of many German and other Continental scholars on the one hand and the intransigence of many British traditionalists on the other. In that sense, his position was very similar to that of Samuel Rolles Driver, who also served as a mediator between German radicalism and British traditionalists. Driver was fortunate enough to be doing that work in the context of the Anglican establishment and its genteel way of solving, or simply tolerating, tensions. Smith was not so fortunate. He had to take a stand, and did so admirably. However, he was not a radical. He was a liberal conservative.

This is not unimportant. And it is not just about locating Smith in the overall context of ecclesiastical politics. Rather, it is necessary to understand this point in order to understand why Smith experienced his anthropological breakthrough only in 1880, and not ten years earlier.

However, it was a remarkable breakthrough that established Smith as one of the centrally important figures in social anthropology. Although Smith's anthropologically orientated study of Arabic and Hebrew material had in a sense only reinforced his theology-driven understanding of Israelite prophecy – confirming once more, in Smith's view, what a massive gulf there was

[25] R. P. Carroll, 'The Biblical Prophets', 148, n. 1.

between everyday Israelite religious practice and the spiritual religion of the prophets–, it had freed him to see the value of an anthropological reading of the Hebrew Bible and other Semitic literature. Driven by this insight, Smith wrote his *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* and, widening his field of research even further, produced the public addresses that were later revised, amplified and published as the *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*.

These two works established his reputation as one of the most significant ancestors of what was later named social anthropology. His importance in a way eclipses that of McLennan. Peter Rivière comments that '[v]ery few anthropologists any longer read McLennan's works and most have only the most general and haziest notion about what they contain. McLennan has been all but deprived of his ancestorhood and teeters on the edge of intellectual oblivion. One of the lifelines which keeps him from falling into it is his link with Smith.'[26] Smith received from McLennan a theory of totemism that, while flawed–as became obvious in the twentieth century–, nevertheless provided Smith with a central methodological insight which enabled him to do his groundbreaking work on Semitic religion. This is how Smith describes that all-important methodological insight:

> The advantage of J. F. McLennan's totem hypothesis over all previous theories of primitive heathenism is that it does justice to the intimate relation between religion and the fundamental structure of society which is so characteristic of the ancient world, and that the truth of the hypothesis can be tested by observation of the social organisation as well as the religious beliefs and practices of early races.[27]

This is why Peter Rivière stresses that '[i]t is not Smith's application of McLennan's evolutionary schema that is significant but the transmission of McLennan's sociological method; a method that has remained central to social anthropology',[28] triggered off Durkheim's sociological study of religion and runs 'through Radcliffe-Brown to Evans-Pritchard, and so into one of the mainstreams of British social anthropological thought'.[29]

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[26] P. Rivière, 'William Robertson Smith and John Ferguson McLennan', 298.

[27] W. R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885), 223.

[28] P. Rivière, 'William Robertson Smith and John Ferguson McLennan' (cf. n. 13), 301.

[29] Ibid., 301.