

## Jewish Historical Studies

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

---

### William Robertson Smith, Solomon Schechter and contemporary Judaism

Bernhard Maier <sup>1,\*</sup>

**How to cite:** Maier, B. 'William Robertson Smith, Solomon Schechter and contemporary Judaism.' *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2017, 48(1), pp. 64-73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2016v48.026>.

Published: 01 May 2017

---

#### Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

#### Copyright:

© 2017, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2016v48.026>

#### Open Access:

*Jewish Historical Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

\*Correspondence: [bernhard.maier@uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:bernhard.maier@uni-tuebingen.de)

<sup>1</sup> University of Tübingen, Germany

## William Robertson Smith, Solomon Schechter and contemporary Judaism

---

BERNHARD MAIER

University of Tübingen, Germany\*

During Solomon Schechter's first years in the University of Cambridge, one of his most illustrious colleagues was the Scottish Old Testament scholar and Arabist William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), who is today considered to be among the founding fathers of comparative religious studies. Smith was the son of a minister of the strongly evangelical Free Church of Scotland, which had constituted itself in 1843 as a rival to the state-controlled established Church of Scotland. Appointed Professor of Old Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College Aberdeen at the early age of twenty-four, Smith soon came into conflict with the conservative theologians of his church on account of his critical views. After a prolonged heresy trial, he was finally deprived of his Aberdeen chair in 1881. In 1883 he moved to Cambridge, where he served, successively, as Lord Almoner's Reader in Arabic, University Librarian, and Thomas Adams's Professor of Arabic. Discussing Schechter's relations with Robertson Smith, one has to bear in mind that direct contact between Schechter and Smith was confined to a relatively short period of less than five years (1890–94), during which Smith was frequently ill and consequently not resident in Cambridge at all.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is not much written evidence, so that several hints and clues that have come down to us are difficult to interpret, our understanding being sometimes based on inference and reasoning by analogy rather than on any certain knowledge. Finally, it must be recalled that the topic has already been dealt with in great detail in a paper that Professor Stefan Reif contributed to the

1 See John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912); Bernhard Maier, *William Robertson Smith: His Life, his Work and his Times* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

1994 centenary congress on Smith.<sup>2</sup> As may be seen from Reif's discussion of the evidence, Smith was supportive of Schechter throughout his years at Cambridge, although he had previously made highly critical statements about Rabbinic Judaism in his book *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church* (1881, second edition 1892) and continued to be critical of those aspects of Jewish scholarship which he held to be at variance with the kind of Higher Criticism that he himself advocated. In what follows, I shall examine some hitherto neglected supplementary material, trying to present this evidence in a wider biographical and historical perspective. This is not an essay on Schechter per se, but an attempt to give a deeper understanding of the place of both contemporary Jews and the historical study of Judaism in the mind and mentality of one of Schechter's most important Cambridge colleagues.

Putting the relations of Smith with Schechter into historical perspective, one needs to consider the cultural and religious milieu into which Smith was born, the influence of theological value judgments that he acquired in the course of his studies and academic career, the example set by teachers, colleagues, and friends, and last but not least his own contacts with Jews and Judaism prior to his acquaintance with Schechter. Needless to say, while all these factors constitute a kind of seamless garment, we also need to make allowance for subtle or even profound changes in Smith's attitude to Jews and Judaism. Considering his earliest acquaintance with these, it must be recalled that he grew up in a most conservative milieu, namely in a Free Church manse that was situated in an extremely rural part of Aberdeenshire in the north-east of Scotland. Thus Smith's earliest acquaintance with Jews, Judaism, Hebrew, and the Hebrew Bible would have been entirely through the religious education that his father and mother provided for their children, for there was no formal schooling. As we know from a detailed description left by Smith's younger sister Alice, a chapter from the Old Testament would be read at family worship every morning, all the psalms from the Scottish psalter would have to be learnt by heart, and on Sunday afternoons, Smith's mother would use colourful cards to familiarize the children with biblical stories.<sup>3</sup> Smith's father was a former school director and of a rather scholarly bent, recalling many years later that his first-born son William "learned the Hebrew alphabet

2 Stefan C. Reif, "William Robertson Smith in Relation to Hebraists and Jews at Christ's College Cambridge", in *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. William Johnstone (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 210–23.

3 See Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 19–22.

so as to read the words of the language before the age of six”, adding, “but after beginning regular work he forgot, or at least ceased to concern himself with this, and at a much later period had to begin the study all over again.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there were hardly any opportunities of making contact with Jews or with Judaism as a living religion. As Alice recalled in her old age, after she had been living in Germany for many decades: “Once there came to our home a hawker, a German Jew who peddled pictures. This was a rather special event, and both Lucy and I were allowed to buy a picture. I chose a coloured print of Dr Martin Luther, one of my heroes, my sister chose something else. Then our brother joined us and engaged in a German conversation with the pedlar, which pleased us greatly.”<sup>5</sup> But apart from such stray encounters, which must have been quite rare, Jews, and especially observant Jews, were hardly to be seen in rural Aberdeenshire. Even in Aberdeen itself, the Aberdeen Hebrew Congregation was not formed until 1893, the year before Smith died, which makes one suspect that many Aberdonians would have regarded contemporary Jews and Judaism as somewhat exotic.

The latter assumption seems to be confirmed by an incident that relates to the well-known portrait of Smith which was painted by his artist friend George Reid in 1877 and now hangs above the fireplace in the Mountbatten Room in Christ’s College.<sup>6</sup> As Smith told his younger brother Charles when the portrait was first exhibited in February 1877: “G. Reid’s portrait of me is now in Edinburgh where it is I understand admired as one of the best things he has done. The *Aberdeen Journal* in noticing it spoke of ‘my unmistakably Jewish features!’ Not a bad joke, the source of which I suspect is a mystification Reid played off on Bough. Bough with his usual rude swagger asked Reid ‘Is your friend a Jew’, to which R. seriously answered ‘Of course, don’t you see it.’ Bough had no doubt been talking

4 Biographical sketch of W. P. Smith preserved in Aberdeen University Library (Ms. 3678), quoted in Black and Chrystal, *Life*, 11; Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 25.

5 In the German original: “Einmal kam ein mit Bildern hausierender deutscher Jude ins Haus. Es war ein ganz ungewöhnliches Ereignis, und Lucy und ich durften ein Bild kaufen. Ich wählte einen bunten Druck von Dr. Martin Luther, einem meiner Helden, meine Schwester etwas anderes. Unser Bruder kam dazu und unterhielt sich deutsch mit dem Mann, was uns riesig freute.” Alice Smith’s childhood recollections survive in an ms. copy presented to her oldest son William on his birthday on 28 May 1942, and in a typescript of uncertain date. Internal evidence suggests that the text was written c. 1933; see Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 302.

6 Black and Chrystal, *Life*, frontis. (black and white).

again to the critic, who had probably never seen a Jew himself.”<sup>7</sup> In this context, it is perhaps also worth noting that the literary critic William Ernest Henley (a friend of Robert Louis Stevenson and the model for Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*) many years later began a rather vitriolic article on Smith “by attributing Smith’s origins to a chance visit of the Wandering Jew to Aberdeen.” While Smith’s biographers, John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal, noted somewhat scathingly that Henley’s article “displayed much of the literary hooliganism which was his favourite affectation” and that the remark about the wandering Jew was “in a vein of pleasantry now happily obsolete”, they also referred to Smith’s outward appearance by noting, “His face as a whole had, curiously enough, a certain suggestion of the East in it – a characteristic which Smith himself energetically repudiated”.<sup>8</sup> Although it is difficult to know what exactly Smith’s ideas with respect to race and racism were, one suspects he was as convinced of the superiority of Europeans above non-Europeans as he was convinced of the superiority of Christianity above non-Christian religions.

Moving on to Smith’s formation as a scholar and his later academic career, it is worth examining the attitude towards Jews and Judaism of those scholars with whom he was in close contact and whom he regarded as teachers and/or friends. One of the first that comes to mind is Paul de Lagarde, whom Smith got to know at the same time as Julius Wellhausen, namely during his second stay at Göttingen in the summer of 1872. As is well known, Lagarde was ferociously anti-Jewish, and his writings were a major influence on many later German antisemites.<sup>9</sup> While there seems to be no direct evidence from which we might infer Smith’s attitude towards Lagarde’s antisemitism, it is perhaps significant that in Smith’s letters to Lagarde, the loving attention which he bestows on questions of Hebrew and Syriac philology contrasts sharply with the somewhat vague and lukewarm remarks that he passes on Lagarde’s religious writings. However, as Lagarde was contemptuous not only of Jews and Judaism but also of his Göttingen colleague Albrecht Ritschl, who was at that time Smith’s favourite German theologian, it is difficult to know whether Smith disliked Lagarde’s theology or his aggressive racism – or both.<sup>10</sup>

7 Letter quoted in Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 185.

8 Black and Chrystal, *Life*, 500 and 561.

9 For a recent biography highlighting this particular aspect, see Ulrich Sieg, *Deutschlands Prophet: Paul de Lagarde und die Ursprünge des modernen Antisemitismus* (Munich: Hanser, 2007).

10 For a detailed discussion of Smith’s relations with Lagarde, see Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 114–17.

To put Smith's experience of German antisemitism in perspective, let us take a closer look at two near-contemporary British observers. Travelling through Germany on his way from Bala in Wales to Geneva in Switzerland in the autumn of 1887, the Welsh educationalist Owen Morgan Edwards (who, like Smith, was strongly influenced by nineteenth-century Calvinism) not only met with many antisemitic stereotypes that were current in Germany at the time, but also absorbed and reproduced them in a highly uncritical fashion.<sup>11</sup> As another witness, one might refer to Smith's fellow-Scotsman and friend Ion Keith-Falconer. He experienced German antisemitism during his stay in Leipzig in the winter of 1880, writing home in a letter: "Delitzsch, I suppose you know, has just published a pamphlet called 'Falsche Wage ist nicht gut', in reply to Rohling's 'Talmud-Jude'. Rohling is a Roman Catholic priest, and bigotted to an absurd degree against the unfortunate Jews, who are universally disliked in Germany. I asked a gentleman the other day, 'Woran erkennen Sie denn einen Juden?' [How do you recognize a Jew?]; answer: 'An seinem allgemeinen brutalen Wesen' [by his common savage nature]. This gives the key-note to the general anti-Jew agitation in Germany. No specific charge against them as a body; only a strong antipathy to the Jew."<sup>12</sup>

Due to the paucity of our sources, for most of Smith's letters from Germany appear to be lost, we know of only one incident in which Smith was actually confronted with German antisemitism. This happened when he was travelling the length and breadth of Germany together with his artist friend George Reid in the spring of 1876. The episode is not mentioned in the 1912 biography of Smith, but the book in fact contains a drawing that Reid had made of Smith on that occasion. Here we see Smith gesticulating with his right hand and grabbing with his left what looks like the carrying strap of a knapsack. However, a look at the full picture reveals that we are in the middle of a quarrel in a railway compartment, in which Smith and a Jewish rabbi argue with a Protestant clergyman who declares with outstretched forefinger that he is in his own country and will "have his right" (*Ich bin in meinem eigenen Lande und will mein Recht haben!*), while the clergyman's

11 See Wolfgang Schamoni, "O. M. Edwards und sein Erstlingswerk, O'r Bala i Geneva (1889): Reisebilder eines Walisers aus Belgien, Deutschland und der Schweiz", in *150 Jahre "Mabinogion": Deutsch-walisische Kulturbeziehungen*, ed. Bernhard Maier and Stefan Zimmer (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), 245–8.

12 Letter quoted in Robert Sinker, *Memorials of the Hon. Ion Keith-Falconer, M.A., late Lord Almoner's Professor of Arabic in the University of Cambridge, and Missionary to the Mohammedans of Southern Arabia* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell & Co., 1888), 95.

bride, who is sitting by the window, indignantly mutters, *Höchst ungezogen!* [most unmannerly]. As we learn from the text that accompanies the scene in the original travel diary from which this picture is taken, Smith had grabbed the strap with which passengers could open the window, because the Rabbi had begun to feel unwell in the close air, upon which the Protestant clergyman fiercely declared that he had absolutely no right to fresh air, claiming that “this was a fruit of the unrighteous emancipation of the Jews.”<sup>13</sup> The fact that Smith in this case sided with the rabbi against his Protestant colleague, is probably not entirely coincidental, as Smith seems to have been highly sensitive to all forms of incivility, as was noted, for instance, by his friend James George Frazer.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, one should obviously not exaggerate the significance of an isolated incident.

To return to Smith’s academic peers, a closer look at the case of Theodor Nöldeke may serve to show just how complex and at times irrational scholarly attitudes towards Jews and Judaism could be.<sup>15</sup> Priding himself on what he held to be an entirely non-religious rationalism, Nöldeke was disgusted by contemporary German antisemitism and did not mince his words in denouncing its unfairness and irrationality. For this reason he was asked more than once to give evidence in court, using his expert knowledge to counter popular anti-Jewish prejudice. Nevertheless, Nöldeke’s self-proclaimed rationalism was not without its blind spots, for while he sneered at Lagarde’s antisemitism, he did in fact hold similar negative ideas about other peoples that were hardly better founded. Moreover, Nöldeke was explicitly critical of all forms of religion, including Judaism, so when in 1889 his friend and colleague, the Jewish librarian Samuel Landauer, had his little son circumcised, Nöldeke did not shy away from telling his former student Snouck Hurgronje that “such barbarian practices ought to be banned by the police in our countries.”<sup>16</sup> When in 1906 the Jewish librarian Jakob Fromer promoted the complete assimilation of the Jews, Nöldeke strongly supported his ideas, which in turn led Hermann Cohen to charge Nöldeke with antisemitism. In the case of Smith, it may well be assumed that he became more tolerant

13 See Reif, “William Robertson Smith”, 223, drawing reproduced 221.

14 See letter from Frazer to Smith’s friend John Forbes White, printed in full in Robert Ackerman, ed., *Selected Letters of Sir J. G. Frazer* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 102–10.

15 See Bernhard Maier, *Gründerzeit der Orientalistik: Theodor Nöldekes Leben und Werk im Spiegel seiner Briefe* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2013), esp. 29–32.

16 Theodor Nöldeke to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 17 Sept. 1889, in Maier, *Gründerzeit der Orientalistik*, 32, 243.

from the early 1880s, when he was no longer Professor at the Free Church College Aberdeen and had to come to terms with a wide variety of scholarly attitudes and standpoints in his position as co-editor of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. However, the necessity of engaging with and mediating contradictory claims must have become familiar to him from the mid-1870s, when he joined the the Old Testament Company of the Committee for the Revision of the Authorised Version of the Bible.

Yet another friend of Smith's, whose attitude in these matters may be examined in some detail, was William Wright.<sup>17</sup> Like Nöldeke (who was among his closest friends), Wright was religiously indifferent, and his private letters clearly indicate that his professional judgment on colleagues was based on the quality of their scholarship and their adherence to scholarly standards rather than on their religious convictions. Thus Wright found words of generous praise for Abraham Geiger, but scathing remarks for Emanuel Deutsch, whom he appears to have regarded as a kind of humbug.<sup>18</sup> In particular, Wright appears to have found it galling that the public at large considered Deutsch to be an expert on oriental literature, while Wright held him to be a popularizer rather than an original scholar. In the parlance of the period, however, criticism of scholarly deficiencies could easily be couched in terms that we would now consider racist. Thus Wright told his friend Nöldeke in a letter written on 5 March 1889 that David Samuel Margoliouth's election to the Laudian Professorship of Arabic at Oxford was above all due to the ignorance of the election board, stating, "Mr Margoliouth, though a Christian by profession, is only, I believe, one remove from a Jew, and has all the faults of his race. Ask some of yr classical scholars about his 'Aeschlyli Agamemno', in which he ventured to rewrite Aeschylus."<sup>19</sup> It is interesting that Smith was also highly critical of Margoliouth, as in a letter to the Irish historian Alice Stopford Green, in which Smith puns on Margoliouth's name, calling him "that silly (tho' clever) young fellow Margoliouth (a real pearl of Jewish acuteness and absurdity, as his name suggests)."<sup>20</sup>

17 Not to be confused with William Aldis Wright, vice-master and librarian of Trinity College, Cambridge; see Bernhard Maier, *Semitic Studies in Victorian Britain: A Portrait of William Wright and his World through his Letters* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011).

18 See *ibid.*, 71, 89, 242.

19 Unpublished letter, papers of Theodor Nöldeke, Tübingen University Library, Md 782 A 5.

20 Unpublished letter dated 28 April [1893], papers of Alice Stopford Green, Dublin, National Library of Ireland. I would like to thank Angus Mitchell for bringing this letter to my attention. *Margalit* (pl. *margaliot*), like Greek *margarites*, means pearl.



Obviously, in many cases a certain sense of rivalry, competition, and sometimes jealousy did not originate in religious or denominational differences, but rather in the fact that Jewish and non-Jewish scholars approached the Hebrew Bible and related literature from different standpoints, but were ultimately competing for the same sources of funding and public appreciation. This is also illustrated by a major quarrel between William Wright, Smith and Schechter's predecessor at Cambridge, Solomon Schiller-Szinessy towards the end of 1887. As Wright told his old friend, the Leiden orientalist Michaël Jan de Goeje, in a confidential letter:

I never intend to see or speak to Mr Schiller-Szinessy again (except it be officially). Nor does RS, nor (I think) W Aldis Wright. At a meeting of the Bd of Oriental Studies before Xmas, without any warning, he all at once made a most ferocious attack in the foulest Houndsditch on me & Smith – called us his worst enemies in this University – denounced me as an impostor – RS as a liar (shaking his fist in his face) – and raved & howled like a madman. The whole origin of the thing I believe to be that RS & I wanted to get established a lectureship in Aramaic (in the widest sense), with a salary of £100 a year, of course with an eye to Bensly's holding it now & perhaps Bevan afterwards. I imagine that Mr Sch-Szy thought this wd in some way interfere with his lecturing on the Targûms, or that the money wd in some mysterious fashion be plucked out of his pocket. After the scene at the Bd, Mr Sch-Szy got up a row with Bensly in the street, and reviled him similarly, I am told.<sup>21</sup>

Significantly, Wright afterwards labelled this letter with a note, "Please destroy this scrawl", so one suspects this type of conflict may well have been more frequent than our evidence suggests.

In conclusion, what may we take to have been the main factors that prompted Smith's support of Schechter and guided his professional relations with him? As Professor Reif pointed out long ago, Smith was strongly influenced by the traditional deprecation of Rabbinic Judaism which has its origins in the New Testament and was certainly much alive in Protestant Biblical Higher Criticism in the second half of the nineteenth century. This surfaces perhaps most clearly in Smith's lectures on *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, published in the spring of 1881, while he was still hoping to defend and maintain his position as Professor of Old Testament exegesis in the Free Church College Aberdeen. While

21 Unpublished letter dated 3 Feb. 1888, papers of Jan de Goeje, Leiden University Library, BPL 2389.

this explains the conservative stance that Smith took in the book, he was obviously also much in line with those segments in the Free Church of Scotland that cultivated a certain liberalism, tolerance, and openness of mind. More decisively, perhaps, the loss of his Aberdeen chair and his subsequent appointment at the University of Cambridge may be seen as a turning-point not only in Smith's professional career but also in his attitude towards religious and denominational differences. The loss of his Aberdeen chair appears to have entailed a certain estrangement from his church, so that theological value judgments became less important than they used to be. Significantly, Smith's theological correspondence with Albrecht Ritschl, which he had been conducting for many years, appears to have ceased at about that time, and Smith's interest in social anthropology increased as his involvement in ecclesiastical affairs diminished. Moreover, we know from a confidential letter which William Wright sent Theodor Nöldeke that Smith's appointment to the Lord Almoner's Readership at Cambridge was mainly due to the good offices of Wright's brother-in-law, Richard Frederick Littledale, who was one of the leading representatives of the English High Church Movement.<sup>22</sup> If Smith knew of this, as is probable, it may well have confirmed his suspicion that a decent and fair treatment was after all quite independent of religious convictions and not always coming from those quarters from which you expected it.

In sum, it appears that Smith's support of Schechter closely reflects his growing insight that religious convictions are to a large extent shaped by biographical factors. This appears to have made him both more charitable and tolerant of the religious convictions of others and more critical of the stance which he himself had taken while he was still a professor in the Free Church College Aberdeen. Significantly, in a letter written immediately after the end of the heresy trial in 1881, Smith told the Leiden Bibliacist Abraham Kuenen (whom he had criticized fiercely at the outset of his career) that he had come from a different background, but that every year of study had made him think more highly of Kuenen's work. A year later, when Kuenen sent Smith a copy of his Hibbert Lectures on "National Religions and Universal Religions", Smith told the author that what he had "found most instructive, & what is certainly most necessary at present is your vindication of Judaism."<sup>23</sup> The fact that popular ideas about Judaism

22 See Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 220.

23 See Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 116–17, 121.

were all too often due to unsympathetic outsiders, and that biographical differences accounted in large measure for differences in perception, was also highlighted by Schechter, who, in an 1891 review article, “The Law and Recent Criticism”, noted that most modern descriptions of the Jewish Sabbath made it appear “almost worse than the Scotch Sunday as depicted by continental writers.”<sup>24</sup> With respect to scholarship in particular, both Smith and Schechter certainly believed in complementarity, Schechter telling Smith on one occasion: “You Christians know Hebrew grammar. We know Hebrew. We need not be dissatisfied with the division.”<sup>25</sup>

**\*Note on contributor**

Bernhard Maier took his PhD in the University of Bonn in 1989 and was subsequently Reader and Professor in Celtic in the University of Aberdeen. Since 2006, he has been Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Tübingen. His books include *William Robertson Smith: His Life, His Work and His Times* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) and *Semitic Studies in Victorian Britain: A Portrait of William Wright and his World through his Letters* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011).

[bernhard.maier@uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:bernhard.maier@uni-tuebingen.de)

© 2017, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

24 Schechter, “The Law and Recent Criticism”, *JQR* o.s. (1891), 763, repr. in Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, 1st Series (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1896), 245.

25 Quoted from Reif, “William Robertson Smith”, 212.