

## PROFESSOR DAVIDSON

PROFESSOR ANDREW BRUCE DAVIDSON was born in 1831 at Kirkhill Farm, in the parish of Ellon, about twenty miles north of Aberdeen. His father was a sturdy, honest farmer, keenly interested in the grave constitutional questions which shortly after 1831 began to agitate the Church of Scotland: indeed, the action taken by the presbytery of Strathbogie, and its minister at Ellon, Dr. J. Robertson, was one of the principal causes which led ultimately to the great disruption in the Church of Scotland, and the formation of the Free Church, in 1843. Davidson's boyhood was passed among these stirring movements, and the side taken in them by his father to some extent determined his future career. It fell to his mother to provide for his education: and she, in 1845, managed to send him to the Grammar School of Aberdeen, where he learnt much, especially in educational method, from its head master, Dr. Melvin, and whence, six months afterwards, he gained a small bursary in the Marischal College, Aberdeen. There, in due course, in 1849, he took his degree; and after this was for three and a half years teacher in the Free Church School, which had just been established in his native parish of Ellon. These three and a half years were the formative period of his life: he worked hard and made himself master, not only of Hebrew, but also of French, German, and other modern languages. In 1852 he entered the Divinity Hall of the Free Church in Edinburgh, called the New College. After the usual four years' theological course he was, in 1856, licensed to become a preacher: he did however but little preaching, or other parochial work, except temporarily; and in 1858 was appointed assistant to the celebrated John Duncan, who was at that time Professor of Hebrew at the New College, a man of remarkable force and originality of character, who no doubt exerted upon Davidson a stimulating influence, but who was destitute of the faculty of teaching a class. After holding this post for five years he was, in 1863, appointed Professor Duncan's successor in the Chair of Hebrew and Oriental Languages. For nearly forty years, till his death on Jan. 26, 1902, he held the same position, making his Chair almost

from the very first, partly by his writings, but chiefly by his personality, one of commanding influence.

Professor Davidson, it may be here added, was LL.D. of Aberdeen, D.D. of Edinburgh and Glasgow, and Litt.D. of Cambridge. He was also a highly valued and influential member of the Old Testament Revision Company.

The following are Professor Davidson's principal publications: *Outlines of Hebrew Accentuation* (1861); an unhappily never completed grammatical and exegetical *Commentary on Job* (1862); an *Introductory Hebrew Grammar* (1874), which has passed through numerous editions, and been very widely adopted as a class-book; a *Hebrew Syntax* (1894), intended for more advanced students, and a repertory of minute and exact information on the subject with which it deals; commentaries on the *Epistle to the Hebrews* (1882), *Job* (1884), *Ezekiel* (1892), and *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (1896)—the last three in the well-known 'Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges'; a compact and admirably written 'Bible-class Primer' on *The Exile and the Restoration*; numerous articles in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, the *Theological Review and Free Church Quarterly* (1886-90), the *Critical Review of Theological and Philosophical Literature* (1891 ff.), the *Expositor*, the *Expository Times* (1891 ff.), the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* ('Apocrypha,' 'Job,' and 'Proverbs'), the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* ('Ecclesiastes'), *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible* ('Angels,' 'Covenant,' 'Eschatology of the Old Testament,' 'God,' 'Hosea,' 'Immanuel,' 'Jeremiah,' 'Prophecy and Prophets'); and (published posthumously) *Biblical and Literary Essays* (1902); *Studies in the Book of Isaiah* (1905); two collections of sermons—*The Called of God* (1902) and *Waiting upon God* (1904); and last, but not least, two important volumes based upon his lectures, viz. *Old Testament Prophecy* (1903) and *The Theology of the Old Testament* (1904).

Professor Davidson was a man of rare powers, and of still rarer qualities of mind. Whatever subject he touched, his treatment of it was at once masterly and judicial. No one had a better power of penetrating to the heart of a subject; no one was more skilful in the discovery and delineation of the characteristics of an age, the drift of an argument, the aim of a writer; no one—witness his *Job*—could more powerfully analyse moral feeling or exhibit the conflict of motives in a difficult moral situation. His mastery of a subject was always complete: he grasped it firmly, he saw it under all its bearings, he expounded it with clearness, and he enabled his reader to see it with him. He was thus able to deal with equal power and success alike

with the language, the exegesis, and the theology of the Old Testament. And his treatment of a subject was, moreover, always judicial. His native insight and discrimination never failed him. He weighed reasons, he balanced opposing considerations, he could always distinguish the certain from the hypothetical. His exegetical works are of the highest excellence: as one reads them the impression forces itself more and more upon one that whatever opinion he puts forth is the result of long and mature study, that he has considered the subject from every point of view, and applied the best available methods to ascertain precisely what his author thought and meant. And so one feels that his interpretation of a difficult passage, or conclusion on a controverted question, has an antecedent presumption of being the best attainable. The same qualities are displayed in his volumes on *Prophecy* and *Old Testament Theology*, and in his *Dictionary* articles: all alike are remarkable for power and breadth of treatment, for wide and careful induction of facts, for close reasoning, and for clear and logical statement of conclusions.

But great as Professor Davidson was as a writer, he was yet greater as a lecturer. It was in the lecture-room that his power and individuality came out most strongly; and here, as all who ever heard him agree, was to be found the true source and secret of his influence. Of a small and spare figure, quiet and unpretending in speech and manner, retiring in disposition and shunning publicity, he nevertheless in the lecture-room riveted the admiration and affection of many generations of pupils, and gained, unsought, an influence over them which those who know what it was unanimously describe as unparalleled. Thus Professor S. D. F. Salmond, of Aberdeen, writes<sup>1</sup>:—

The qualities of a great teacher are possessed by him in unusual measure and in happiest combination. Easy mastery of the subject, lucid and attractive discourse, the faculty of training men in scientific method, the power of making them think out things for themselves, are united in him with the gift of holding their minds, quickening their ideas, and commanding their imaginations. Flashes of insight, rare turns of expression, phrases that stick like arrows, sudden sallies of quiet humour check the wandering attention and charm the hearer, while to all is added the fine contagion of his spiritual feeling for the messages of the Old Testament.

Others who have been his pupils have spoken in similar terms. He had a keen sense of humour; and the quiet sarcasm with which he would sometimes expose ignorance, pretentiousness, or unreasonable self-confidence was as entertaining as it was effective. He was

<sup>1</sup> *Expository Times*, July, 1897, p. 444.

not very willing to occupy the pulpit; but when he could be persuaded to do so, he was a forceful and striking preacher. His published sermons show freshness, independence, religious sympathy, and penetration.

Professor Davidson's central aim, to which everything else may be said to be subordinate, was to realize the *historical* significance of the Old Testament, to show what its different writings were to those who first heard them uttered or read them, to trace the historical progress of religious ideas, to cultivate, in a word, *historical exegesis*<sup>1</sup>. At the time when he began to lecture, the Old Testament was practically never studied from this point of view, the historical books were read uncritically and superficially, the other books were regarded chiefly as a collection of dogmatic utterances, and the whole was treated as of equal value, both historically and doctrinally, throughout. Davidson's pupils have declared what a revelation it was to them to discover from his lectures that the prophets, for instance, were men of flesh and blood like themselves, interested in the political and social movements of their times, and keenly intent upon influencing for good their own contemporaries. They had not then heard what is now a commonplace, that the prophets were men with a message addressed primarily to their own age<sup>2</sup>. At the beginning of Davidson's professoriate, Ewald was the leading Biblical scholar, who had done so much, at least in Germany, to introduce the historical view of the Old Testament; and for a while Davidson followed in his steps. But in 1878 Wellhausen, the most brilliant of Ewald's pupils, published his epoch-making *Geschichte Israels*, in which, while accepting in the main Ewald's general principles, he developed a new theory of the historical position of the ceremonial law of Israel; and Davidson, not indeed at once, but slowly and cautiously, and guarding the new theory against misconceptions, advanced substantially to the same position<sup>3</sup>. But, from first to last, it was the historical interest by which he was prompted; and indirectly, if not directly, he has probably been more instrumental than any other scholar in naturalizing the historical view of the Old Testament in this country. For nearly forty years the ablest young men destined for the ministry of the Free Church passed through his class-room, were trained in his methods, and kindled by his spirit; and Professors W. Robertson

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Biblical and Literary Essays*, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> See the striking words in which Prof. G. A. Smith, in the second of the articles cited below, p. 289, describes the illuminative change thus wrought by Davidson's lectures in his pupils' minds.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. his *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 18 f.

Smith and George Adam Smith, the two most brilliant and influential popularizers of this view, both received from him the initial impulse which made them the teachers that they afterwards became.

Davidson's work was a great one. His lot was cast in a time when opinions which had come to be regarded by many as axiomatic were being rudely disturbed, and when influence and wise guidance were greatly needed. Davidson supplied both. He moved circumspectly; but he was gifted with openness of mind; and when he saw the way, even though it might be a new way, he did not hesitate to follow it. The judgements of a man, whose temper and habits of mind were such as Professor Davidson's were known to be, naturally commanded confidence; and he was the means of guiding many through a difficult and trying transition. With a warm and profound appreciation of the deep spiritual importance of the Old Testament he combined a vivid sense of the historically progressive character of the revelation contained in it: he thus widened at the same time both the spiritual and mental horizon of those who came under his influence; and he taught them to understand and maintain with himself the reality of both these aspects of the Old Testament Scriptures.

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For further particulars respecting Professor Davidson's life and teaching, see the reminiscences (by various writers) in the *British Weekly* for Jan. 30, 1902; Professor W. G. Elmslie in the *Expositor*, Jan. 1888, p. 29 ff.; Professor S. D. F. Salmond in the *Expository Times*, July, 1897, p. 441 ff.; two particularly excellent articles by Professor G. A. Smith in the *Biblical World* (Chicago), Sept., 1902, p. 167 ff., and Oct., 1902, p. 288 ff.; and the Biographical Introduction by A. Taylor Innes, prefixed to *The Called of God*, pp. 3-58. A complete list (so far as is known) of his publications, including articles in Reviews, &c., is given in the *Expository Times* for July, 1904, p. 450 ff.

S. R. DRIVER.