

Bible Translation

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Feminist Choices of Early Women Bible Translators

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Abstract: Translations by two early women Bible translators, Julia E. Smith (1792-1886) and Helen Barrett Montgomery (1861-1934), reflect their difference in purpose in attempting the translations as well as their level of knowledge of translation theory and linguistics. Smith translated merely for personal use in her own small society; her major concern was faithfulness to what she termed “the literal meaning.” Montgomery, on the other hand, wrote in consideration of her audience; she wanted to communicate clearly and naturally in idiomatic terms. Smith was inward-focused, whereas Montgomery was outward-focused.

Keywords: Bible translation; women translators; feminist approaches; translation theory

This paper compares and contrasts the work of two early women Bible translators, Julia E. Smith (1792-1886) and Helen Barrett Montgomery (1861-1934), both Americans, and also contrasts them with men’s translations. Both women were feminists in the sense that they believed women were equally gifted and as able as men to decipher ancient languages and translate sacred Scripture for their own generation. Neither was interested in producing a stately, literary masterpiece suitable for liturgical use.

Julia E. Smith

Julia E. Smith produced a literal, interlinear gloss of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English to use in the “spirit-led” home-based Bible studies and worship groups she and her family favored over institutional churches and clergy. During one Bible study series with an acquaintance, they decided that the King James version had not given the text literally:

Over twenty years ago, when I had four sisters, a friend met with us weekly, to search the Scriptures, we being desirous to learn the exact meaning of every Greek and Hebrew word, from which King James’s forty-seven translators had taken their version of the Bible. We saw by the margin that the text had not been given literally, and it was the literal meaning we were seeking. I had studied Latin and Greek at school, and began by translating the Greek New Testament.¹

But, just as she felt no need for the organized church, she felt no need to consult commentaries or to ask scholars to review her “translation.” As a result it was often nonsensical and unintelligible. She slavishly translated the same Greek or Hebrew root with the same English term, ignoring context and lexical sense variation across languages. She writes:

¹ Smith, “Preface to *The Holy Bible*”, par. 2.

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I soon gave my attention to the Hebrew, and studied it thoroughly, and wrote it out word for word, giving no ideas of my own, but endeavoring to put the same English word for the same Hebrew or Greek word, everywhere, while King James's translators have wholly differed from this rule; but it appeared to us to give a much clearer understanding of the text.²

In addition, she ignored discourse uses of grammatical tense/aspect as well as idioms. For example, she always translated *waw* consecutives with future tense, so that Genesis 1:3, rather than the Authorized Version's "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light," reads: "And God will say there shall be light, and there shall be light." In her preface she revealed her lack of understanding of Hebrew linguistics:

It seems that the original Hebrew had no regard to time, and that the Bible speaks for all ages. If I did not follow the tenses as they are, I myself should be the judge, and man must not be trusted with regard to the Word of God. I think the promiscuous use of the tenses shows that there must be something hidden, that we must search out, and not hold to the outward, for the "letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."³

Julia Smith was over-confident of her ability to translate the original meaning accurately without consulting scholarly opinion:

It may be thought by the public in general, that I have great confidence in myself, in not conferring with the learned in so great a work, but as there is but one book in the Hebrew tongue, and I have defined it word for word, I do not see how anybody can know more about it than I do.⁴ There may be some little inaccuracies, like putting the verb *to be*, for *is*, in a few instances, but I think never has the sense of the Original Tongue been altered.⁵

Smith's literalisms sometimes produced interpretations opposite from what the biblical author intended. Whereas Romans 12:10 can mean either "outdoing one another in showing honor" or "in honour preferring one another," she translates "in honor preceding one another." She drafted and re-drafted over a period of eight years, from 1847 to 1855: "I wrote out the Bible five times, twice from the Greek, twice from the Hebrew, and once from the Latin— the Vulgate."⁶ She had not originally planned to publish her work, but later self-published it in 1876.

Helen Barrett Montgomery

Helen Barrett Montgomery translated the New Testament from Greek, and the American Baptist Publication Society published it in 1924 as *The Centenary Version* in celebration of its 100th anniversary.⁷

Montgomery had studied Greek at Wellesley College and graduated in 1884. She was a Rochester, New York suffragist, founding the Women's Educational and Industrial Union along with Susan B. Anthony to serve poor women and children in the city in what eventually became public health centers. Montgomery introduced educational reforms like kindergartens, vocational training, and health education after she was elected to the Rochester School Board in 1899, the first woman ever elected to public office in the City.

She promoted international ministries as president of the Women's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and traveled to various countries to visit the work. She helped found the World Wide Guild, an international missions education and recruitment organization, and published eight books on missions. She led the Northern Baptist Convention as president from 1921-22 in the height of the fundamentalist controversy, the first woman to hold that position. Montgomery taught a women's Bible study at Lake Avenue Baptist Church for 44 years, and the church licensed her to preach in 1892.

² Ibid., par. 2.

³ Ibid., par. 4.

⁴ Ibid., par. 3.

⁵ Ibid., par. 4.

⁶ Ibid., par. 3.

⁷ It had originally been published in two parts, the Gospels in February, 1924, and Acts through Revelation in December, 1924.

Her motivation for translating the New Testament was “to consider young people, busy Sunday-School teachers, and foreigners, and to try to make it plain.”⁸ While teaching underprivileged boys in a Bible class, the “stately and old expressions which had such a charm for the literary-minded, were a bar and a hindrance to the less educated.”⁹ A few of Montgomery’s translations repeated their street idioms; for example, in 1 Cor 4:13, Paul complains that he and his associates “have been made, as it were, scum-o’-the-earth, the very refuse of the world, to this very hour.”¹⁰ In Mark, Jesus’ statement about paying taxes refers to a “dollar.”

The translation innovated new formatting of the biblical text. Rather than starting every verse at the left margin, Montgomery separated the text into paragraphs, with only verse numbers at the margin. She indented poetry lines. She borrowed the idea of chapter titles from Dwight L. Moody “to aid in becoming so familiar with a book that one could think [one’s] way through it.”¹¹ She also innovated subtitles “to help people who hadn’t a concordance. . .to find a passage that they remembered but couldn’t locate.”¹² Most subtitles summarize the content, like “Feeding of the Four Thousand,” but some were borrowed from hymns: “My richest gain I count but loss” for Phil 3:7–11, and some were catchy enough to be sermon titles: “Breakfast on the Beach” for John 21:8–14. Matt 8:32–34, the response of the Gadarenes to the exorcism of the demoniac, she titled “Hogs Mean More than Men.”

The New Testament in Modern English was an early Study Bible in that it used footnotes to identify Old Testament quotations, textual variants, historical background, credits to other scholars, and to provide brief vocabulary studies.

Montgomery pioneered the use of various punctuation conventions in biblical text.¹³ She employed square brackets to clarify pronoun reference, to indicate a textual problem, identify a possible interpolation, or provide information she thought was missing from the text. She started a new paragraph for each change of speaker in a dialogue, and enclosed their speeches in quotation marks. She translated as quotes fourteen places in 1 and 2 Corinthians and three in Galatians that she judged to be the opinions of opponents that Paul was arguing against. As a notable example, she enclosed 1 Cor 14:34–35 in quotes to indicate that it was a Corinthian slogan taken from their letter, with which Paul disagrees in 14:36:¹⁴

“In your congregation” [you write], “as in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silence in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. On the contrary let them be subordinate as also says the law. And if they want to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” What, was it from you that the word of God went forth, or to you only did it come?

These interpretations were about eighty years ahead of recent commentators.¹⁵ In this and other passages about women in the early Christian church, she appears to follow Katharine Bushnell, who concluded that “the Apostle Paul is here quoting what the Judaizers in the Corinthian church are teaching, –who themselves say women must ‘keep silence’ because Jewish law thus taught.”¹⁶

Montgomery’s *New Testament in Modern English* was a clear, accurate translation that set the stage for the features and formatting of today’s Bible versions.

The difference between these two women’s translations reflects their difference in purpose in attempting the translation as well as their level of knowledge of translation theory and linguistics. The best Bible

⁸ Montgomery, “Translating”, 651.

⁹ Ibid., 651.

¹⁰ Verse quotations are from *The New Testament in Modern English*.

¹¹ Montgomery, “Translating”, 651.

¹² Ibid., 651.

¹³ Vedder, “Mrs. Montgomery’s”, 312.

¹⁴ Bullard, “Feminine”, 121.

¹⁵ Dowd, “Helen Barrett Montgomery”, par. 36.

¹⁶ Bushnell, “*God’s Word*”, par. 201, p. 91. Bushnell (1855-1946) was a medical missionary to China who later served a department of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. She was conservative, and taught that the Bible was inspired and infallible. She had researched in libraries in England and produced Bible study leaflets and correspondence courses that analyzed passages dealing with the status of women. Bushnell collected and published them in 1921.

translators strive for accuracy, clarity, and naturalness. Smith translated merely for personal use in her own small society; her major concern was faithfulness to what she termed “the literal meaning.” She did not aim for clarity, naturalness, or understandability. Montgomery, on the other hand, wrote in consideration of her audience; she wanted to communicate clearly and naturally in idiomatic terms. Smith was inward-focused, whereas Montgomery was outward-focused.

Selected Passages of Interest to Feminists: Comparison of Julia Smith and Helen Barrett Montgomery (MNT) with the Revised Standard Version (RSV)

1 Cor 14:33-36

Julia Smith:

33 For God is not of unsteadiness, but of peace, as in all the churches of the holy ones.

34 Let your women be silent in the churches: for it has not been committed to them to speak; but to be subjected, as also says the law.

35 And if they will learn anything, let them ask their own husbands in the house; for it is shameful for women to speak in the church.

36 Or came out the word of God from you or did it arrive to you only?

MNT:

34 “In your congregation” you write, “as in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silence in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. On the contrary let them be subordinate, as also says the law.

35 And if they want to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for a women to speak in church.”

36 What, was it from you that the word of God went forth, or to you only did it come?

RSV:

33 As in all the churches of the saints,

34 the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says.

35 If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

36 What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?

Rom 16:1-2

Julia Smith:

1 And I place with you Phebe our sister, being servant of the church in Cenchrea:

2 That ye receive her in the Lord, worthy of the holy ones, and encourage her in whatever thing she have need of you: for she also has been the rule of many, and of myself.

MNT:

1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a minister of the church at Cenchrae.

2 I beg you to give her a Christian welcome, as the saints should; and to assist her in any matter in which she may have need of you. For she herself has been made an overseer to many people, including myself.

RSV:

1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cen'chre-ae,
 2 that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.

Rom 16:7**Julia Smith:**

Embrace Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellowprisoners, who are distinguished among the sent, who also have been in Christ before me.

MNT:

and Andronicus and Junia, my kinsfolk and fellow prisoners, who are notable among the apostles, and who became Christians before I did.

RSV:

Greet Androni'cus and Ju'nias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

1 Cor 11:10**Julia Smith:**

Therefore the woman ought to have power upon the head for the angels.

MNT:

For this reason the woman ought to have authority over her head, because of her guardian angels.

RSV:

That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels.

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