

THE JULIA EVELINA SMITH BIBLE: CHANGING SOCIETY'S RULES—THE FIRST WOMAN TO TRANSLATE THE BIBLE

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In the vast array of biblical scholars, Julia Evelina Smith is quite often overlooked. Fortunately, a Bible in The Dunham Bible Museum is displayed in recognition of her amazing accomplishments. Though she is often acknowledged for her success as an early activist for suffrage, Julia is also the first woman to translate the Bible into English. This historical achievement alone makes her worthy of praise, but in addition to that, she completed this great task in a time when women were stereotypically viewed as weak individuals. Smith is one of the many women of nineteenth-century America who refused to allow the ideas of their time to deter them from their goals. Julia Smith was a gifted and radical individual who overcame society's perception of women to become an accomplished Bible translator.

Julia was taught feminist ideas her entire life. She was born in 1792 on a farm in Glastonbury, Connecticut to a middle class family who descended from a long line of political and religious reformers. She was the fourth out of five girls born to Zephiniah and Hannah Smith. She was privileged to have been raised by extremely educated parents, and her father named her after a heroine from an eighteenth century novel. Julia and her sisters grew up surrounded by people of great intellect in a small town where their father was quite well known. According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Smith's mother was a gifted linguist, abolitionist, and mathematician, and her father was a Yale graduate who quit his job as a minister after four years and then became a lawyer and politician.¹ Of this incident, Julia wrote, "He preached only about four years, having come to the conclusion after giving the subject much thought, that preaching for hire was simply making merchandise of the gospel, and contrary to the teachings of Jesus (Sampson 11)."² Like their father, the Smith sisters grew up with independent minds about religion and politics. They each began to show gifts at an early age and Julia's gift was linguistics. She attended Emma Willard's famous Troy Female Seminary.³ The Troy Female Seminary molded Julia's mind in an important way, for it was founded by a feminist who strongly believed that women should have the right to obtain higher education. Furthermore, many of history's most famous female activist and leaders came out of this school. Though Julia grew up in a time where women were not valued as equal citizens, she was surrounded by ideas that encouraged her to move outside of those societal limitations.

She spent most of her life studying language and the Bible, but Julia did not officially begin her quest to translate until 1843 at the age of 51 years old. She was inspired to start by a

¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: Arno Press, 1972.), 151.

² Emily Sampson, *With Her Own Eyes: The Story of Julia Smith, Her Life, and Her Bible* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 11.

³ Emma Willard, *A Plan for Improving Female Education* (Middlebury, VT, 1918), 5.

Baptist preacher in the nineteenth century named William Miller. Using the Bible, Miller believed he had discovered October 22, 1844, as the exact day the world would end, and he became the famous head of a large movement of people who believed him.⁴ Before Miller's declarations were proven false in the Great Disappointment of 1844, Julia had begun to study the Bible in an attempt to come upon the same discoveries as he. In her studying, she found that the Bible could be read more easily if it were translated in a more literal sense. With no initial intention of sharing her work with the world, Julia began to translate out of admiration of the craft and for a more in-depth Bible study for her family and friends. In reference to her work, Julia wrote, "This translation was made for the gratification of six persons, the five Smith sisters, and one friend. They were all much interested in searching the Scriptures after the notorious Miller doctrine came out and they met weekly for that purpose."⁵

Motivated by her love of the Bible and its original languages, Julia completed her translation in seven years, and impressively, this was skillfully done without any help. In speaking of this amazing accomplishment, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, "Julia Smith translated the whole bible absolutely alone without consultation from anyone. And this not once, but five times—twice in the Hebrew, twice from the Greek and once from the Latin". She had studied Latin and Greek in school so she was able to move to complete these translations more quickly. However, at the suggesting of a friend, she taught herself Hebrew, and it was a more difficult task that took her longer to complete her work. Julia was driven by her belief that the King James Bible was not literal enough, so she thoroughly combed through each word searching for its original meaning.

Proving that she had taken on the task of biblical translation out of pure pleasure, Julia waited over twenty years before seeking publication of her work. During this time, Julia and her sister Abby had dedicated much of their time to women's suffrage, and they became early leaders of the feminist movement. They both gained fame for their radical act in 1873, in which they refused to pay taxes until they were given the right to vote, and this led to the government seizing their cows and property. Julia wrote a popular book about this experience, and she and Abby stood firm on their beliefs. Consequently, the Bible was finally published in 1876. It was completely funded by Julia and Abby, and sold so cheaply that they could not have possibly made a profit. Only 1,000 copies were printed and 950 were sold (62). Julia's newfound fame as a feminist made her work more popular especially among women.

In the beginning of her bible, Julia wrote, "It may seem presumptuous for an ordinary woman with no particular advantages of education to translate and publish alone, the most wonderful book that has ever appeared in the world, and thought to be the most difficult to translate."⁶ Julia Evelina Smith was obviously an extremely intelligent human being, and her most admirable qualities lay in her fearlessness. Without hesitation or thoughts of acceptance, Julia did something she had never seen done before. Though there are few sources written about

⁴ David L. Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008).

⁵ Sampson, *With Her Own Eyes*, 42.

⁶ Smith, Julia. "Julia Smith Bible, 1876." HBU.

her life, there are none that express her setting a goal to become the first woman translator. The only certain aspect of Julia's motivation for translating is that she loved the Bible and she sought to gain a deeper understanding of it. Though she is rarely a topic of discussion amongst biblical scholars, Julia accomplished something magnificent that is worthy of honor.

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