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Julia Evelina Smith's Translated Bible¹

“Bible as a Weapon of Defense”: Julia Evelina Smith's Translated Bible

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“Bible as a Weapon of Defense”: Julia Evelina Smith’s Translated Bible

On the surface, just one out of numerous early English translations of the Bible: hardcover book, written in small font and columns, but indeed, a very significant piece of history. Published in 1876, not only was Julia Evelina Smith’s translation of the Bible the first one ever translated by a woman, it was also the only contemporary English translation out of the original languages available to readers for almost twenty years until the publication of the last part of the British revised version in 1894. Besides making a gospel accessible to American contemporaries, the background of Julia’s translated Bible tells a meaningful story about a fearless and purposeful fight for women’s civil rights and equality, which are easily taken for granted nowadays.

Born into a family with a highly educated father who studied theology at Yale and cared for education more than anything, Julia and her four sisters learned both Greek and Latin at a young age. Intrigued by William Miller’s preaching that Jesus would return in 1844, Julia taught herself Hebrew and used childhood acquired skills in Greek and Latin to study the Bible. After Miller’s prediction proved to be wrong, Julia continued to study the Bible and decided to translate the complete Bible word by word (Julia Smith). It took her about seven years of determined work and tens of thousands of handwritten pages to translate both the Old and the New Testament (Shaw). The translation was finally finished in 1854. That truly was a huge accomplishment as it was the first complete translation of the Bible to be done by a woman; however, it remained unpublished for quite a long time or, to be exact, for twenty-one years.

What finally made Julia revise and publish the translation was an incident with the local taxation office. As the only surviving members of the family, Julia and her sister Abby lived together on their father’s farm in Connecticut. An incident occurred when the local town “fathers” had a need of money to pay bills, which made the local tax office increase the property

tax on Smith land (Shaw). After the Smith sisters refused to pay an unfair land assessment, seven of their cows were seized by the local tax collector (May). To fight the injustice, the sisters petitioned the town, but “the federal government honestly believed that women should have no say regarding assessment, taxation, and seizure of property,” so the petition was refused and the tax collector authorized to seize the Smith property. The subsequent disappointment in men’s laws and women’s deprivation of rights prompted Julia to turn to God’s laws, so she revised and published her translation of the Bible as the ultimate weapon of defense. The publication cost was \$4000, all covered by the Smith sisters. One thousand copies of the Bible were made and offered for \$2.5 each. When asked why she spent the money on the publication cost instead of paying a part of the tax bill, Julia said that she had to prove that “a woman can do more than any man has ever done” (Shaw). And she most certainly succeeded in doing so. Even though her translation was criticized to be too literal and to lack any flow, it was more accurate than the King James’ translation and the only available contemporary English translation out of the original languages at the time (Julia Evelina). Even Professor Young, a well-known scholar who taught Hebrew at Harvard University, recognized the value of Julia’s work and told her: “I am astonished that you could get the translation so correct without consulting some learned man” (Shaw).

The story of the sisters and their cows spread throughout the country, encouraging women’s suffrage activists to fight for women’s property and voting rights. Using their own intelligence to draw the society’s attention to injustice, the sisters actively participated in the fight by holding speeches and writing letters to point out government corruption. One of their most famous quotes, and at the same time one of the most significant quotes of the suffragist movement, was: “God governs the world by moral means; and no logic can be plainer, no truth can be clearer, than, if it be wrong to take a man’s property without his consent, [it] must be

equally wrong to take a woman's property without her consent" (Shaw). The argument that was often used to justify women's inferiority was that they were less intelligent. However, now that Julia's Bible disproved that thesis, nothing stood in the way of women's equality.

To conclude, on the surface, just one out of numerous early English translations of the Bible: hardcover book, written in small font and columns, but indeed, Julia Evelina Smith's translated Bible is a very significant piece of history that gave a light of hope to all women in the 19th century that reconciled with inferiority and almost gave up on their fight for equality. Together with her sister Abby, Julia revealed "the grit of a pioneering American spirit that refused to permit injustice to triumph and demonstrated that gender has nothing whatever to do with the ability to think, speak, and act effectively" (Shaw). Today, even though the Smith sisters are long gone, the Bible is still here to remind us that difference makers such as themselves have always been and will always be worthy of every admiration.

Works Cited

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