

FEMININE AND FEMINIST TOUCHES IN THE CENTENARY NEW TESTAMENT

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In 1924 the American Baptist Publication Society published its *Centenary Translation of the New Testament*, “to signalize the completion of the first hundred years of work” of the Society.¹ The translator was Mrs. Helen Barrett Montgomery, apparently the first woman to undertake a biblical translation project of this scope, certainly in English. Outside the denominational papers, little notice was ever taken of her efforts. It was not given serious review in either the scholarly journals or the popular press. A good many articles did appear in 1924 dealing with a new translation of the New Testament, but it was Edgar Goodspeed’s, published the year before. This was too bad, for the *Centenary* was a competent work, though perhaps not with the consistent quality of Goodspeed or of the earlier version by James Moffatt.

What strikes one first about this version is its format. Each book is given a page of brief introductory comment, with such information as date, writer, key verses or thoughts—whatever struck Montgomery as especially interesting. The prefatory page to the Acts of the Apostles indicates that it is better entitled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” These notes, as well as the chapter and section titles, reflect the New Testament scholarship current in the twenties. Each chapter has a heading, and is further broken down into titled sections. The titles of some of these sections lend a unique character to the translation: “An Early Hymn Quoted” (1 Tim 3.16); “The Sky Broadcasts the Wondrous Story” (Lk 2.9b-12; in the early days of radio this must have sounded quite catchy.); “An Old, New Commandment” (1 Jn 2.7-11); “Sealing the Saints” (Rev 7.4-8); “Fly Abroad, Thou Mighty Gospel,” (Rom 10.16-21); “Paul Preserves a Saying of Jesus” (Acts 20.32-38); “Paul’s Swan Song” (2 Tim 4).

The principle of the translation is pretty much formal equivalence, more so than Goodspeed and certainly Moffatt; but at its best, there are some fine translational touches. The *amēn legō humin* in Mk 11.2 appears as “in solemn truth I tell you.” There is acute sensitivity to context in the renderings of the same simple phrase, *soi legō*, in Mk 5.41 and Lk 5.24. In the former passage, Jesus, speaking to Jairus’ daughter, says, “Little girl, I am speaking to you; arise!” In the latter passage Jesus is speaking to the paralytic, in defiance of the scribes and Pharisees: “I bid you rise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” In Mk 11.14, where Jesus addresses the fig tree, *apokritheis eipen autē* is rendered, “So, addressing the tree, he said . . .”

Unfortunately, there are many lapses. She often falls back into the old “Forbid him not” style (Lk 9.50). There are awkward passages—sometimes simply incomplete sentences. “How can this be? For I have no husband?” (Lk 1.34) “Which having begun to be spoken by the Lord, was confirmed to us by

¹ Judson Press has published this translation since 1954 under the title *The New Testament in Modern English*.

those who heard him.” (Heb 2.3) “Accordingly when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard it said . . .” (Jn 4.1)

This may be enough to give some idea of the flavor and character of Montgomery’s translation, but if anyone at the time ever gave it even this much critical attention, I have not been able to find it. This may be because the version was published by a denominational press, but it is not unreasonable to harbor a suspicion that little attention was paid it because its translator was a woman.

Born in 1861, Helen Barrett graduated from Wellesley College, where she specialized in Greek. She later married a businessman, William A. Montgomery, who taught a Sunday School class in the church of which her father was pastor, Lake Avenue Baptist in Rochester, New York. She became a church leader in her own right, both as a longtime teacher at Lake Avenue and as a denominational worker. She was a licensed minister, though never ordained. Reflecting her orientation toward the social gospel of her fellow Baptist and Rochesterian Walter Rauschenbusch, she was actively involved in a number of social welfare issues. She was a friend of Susan B. Anthony, and supported woman suffrage. The great passion of her life, however, was foreign missions, in support of which she wrote several books and travelled widely. This included a trip around the world visiting mission fields, gathering material for her major work, *The King’s Highway*; in all of this she had the enthusiastic support of her husband. In 1921 she was elected president of what was then the Northern Baptist Convention; she appears to have been the first woman ever to have held such an office in a major Christian denomination. When she died on October 18, 1934, the *New York Times* honored her with an obituary, never mentioning, however, her presidency of the convention, or her translation of the New Testament.²

I have found two interesting statements made about the translation, referring to its having been made by a woman. Each raises an interesting question that is worth investigating. Is there anything about the *Centenary* that is particularly feminine, or is there anything showing feminist leanings?

When the *Centenary New Testament* was published, the American Baptist Publication Society announcement said of it, “Mrs. Montgomery has given a sweet, womanly touch to the finer passages.”³ It is hard to see how, even in 1924, this could have been taken by the translator as anything but a put-down. I’m not at all sure what could have been meant by “the finer passages.” (Did she not give a sweet, womanly touch to the coarser passages?) I have certainly not been able to detect in her New Testament anything that I would have recognized, without knowing it, as having come from a woman’s hand. The publisher’s statement almost leads you to expect an occasional “Dear me,” or “Goodness gracious”—in the finer passages, of course.

² Information on Montgomery’s life may be found in Winthrop S. Hudson’s article on her in Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women 1607-1950: a Biographical Dictionary*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), vol. II. Hudson gives her death date as October 19. This is apparently in error; the *New York Times* obituary appeared in the issue of October 19 (p. 23), reporting her death at her daughter’s home in Summit, N.J., on October 18.

³ *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 1924, section 1 part 2, p. 6.

At least one person, however, has claimed to detect such a use of feminine language. John Hamilton Skilton gave a brief review of Montgomery's translation in his massive dissertation on English translations of the New Testament.⁴ His four pages on the *Centenary* are appreciative, and his stylistic criticisms, the most extensive that exist on this version, are well-taken. But Hamilton detects a feminine touch in Romans: "Also hardly in Paul's style is the feminine 'dear': 'dear Persis' (Rom 16.12) and 'dear, dear' in 'Stachys, my dear, dear friend' (Rom 16.9)"⁵ In reviewing Goodspeed's translation in the pages immediately preceding, Skilton failed to report Goodspeed's presumably masculine "my dear Persis" and "my dear Stachys" in these same passages. So also the New English Bible. I do not recall anyone accusing either Goodspeed or the NEB of being feminine. In one episode of Masterpiece Theatre's *The Last Place on Earth*, the tough, grizzled Robert Scott, deep in the Antarctic wilderness, worn out and frustrated, muses in his shelter on his "dear, dear friend." So much for the sweet, womanly touch.

One contemporary who did take notice of the *Centenary New Testament* was the noted Greek scholar A. T. Robertson, whom Montgomery admired.⁶ He published a ten-line review which is quite favorable: "The work is worthily done and has a dignity and nobility and freshness that give it distinction even in the midst of many new translations."⁷ This certainly gives no hint of any soft, delicate, frilly language. But in the next sentence he says, "This is a woman's interpretation of the Greek New Testament." What did he mean by that? Obviously the translator is a woman; her name is Helen. He seems to imply that the translation reflects a woman's touch, not in its expression, but in its interpretation.

If there are no feminine frills in this New Testament, are there feminist touches? Yes, as a matter of fact, there are. One will be disappointed if one goes looking for the use of what we today call inclusive language. Montgomery's use of the masculine pronoun as a common pronoun conforms completely to long received usage. She is even quite capable of importing a "man" where there is none in the original. Lk 5.39, translating *oudeis*, reads, "And no man after drinking old wine, wishes for new." The Greek *huioi* is translated "sons," even in passages where it surely refers to both sexes: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5.45); "you will be the sons of the Most High" (Lk 6.35).

Yet there are a few passages where the translation reveals a definite feminist interest. In Rom 16.1 Paul commends to his audience a woman named Phoebe, described as a *diakonos* of the church at Cencreae. Here alone in the letters, the King James Version renders the word as "servant;" elsewhere it is "deacon" or "minister." Today's English Version (which avoids "deacon" also) says she

⁴ John Hamilton Skilton, *The Translation of the New Testament into English 1881-1950* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1961), vol. I, pp. 388-92.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 390.

⁶ Montgomery mentions Robertson's influence, and other matters pertaining to her work as a translator, in "Translating the New Testament," *The Baptist Standard*, July 2, 1925, p. 2; reprinted from *The Baptist*.

⁷ *The Review and Expositor*, XX (1925), 244-245.

"serves the church" there; the New English Bible elevates her and says she "holds office" at Cenchreae. The Revised Standard Version, the Jerusalem and New Jerusalem Bibles, and the New American Bible (the last three being Catholic translations) go ahead and call her a "deaconess." Montgomery goes further than all, and calls Phoebe "a minister of the church at Cenchreae," with a footnote referring to the use of the word at 1 Cor 3.5, 1 Tim 4.6, Eph 3.7, and 1 Thess 3.2.

1 Tim 3.8-10 speaks of the qualifications of deacons. Verse 11 speaks of the qualifications of, literally, "women." This is often taken to mean the wives of deacons, or sometimes, female deacons. Montgomery makes her opinion clear. They are in fact "deaconesses." Indeed, the section title here is "Qualifications of Deacons and Deaconesses."

In Rom 16.7 there is a difficult passage greeting one Andronicus and someone else, who are described as "notable among the apostles"—presumably meaning that they are apostles. The other person is almost universally taken to be a man named Junias. The RSV goes so far as to describe the pair as "men of note among the apostles," although the word "men" does not appear in the Greek, which simply uses a plural adjective. The problem is that since the name happens to be used in the accusative case, it is impossible to tell whether the name is a masculine or feminine noun of the first declension. It could equally as well be Junia. In favor of latter is the fact that the masculine form Junias is not well attested; there is a textual variant, Julia; and several Church Fathers, such as Jerome and Chrysostom, understand it as a woman's name.⁸ Among recent translations, only the NEB and TEV allow (in a footnote) that this apostle could be a woman.⁹ Montgomery is bold in her decision, and with no footnote at all translates, "Salute . . . Andronicus and Junia . . . who are notable among the apostles."

In 1 Cor. 14.34-36 there occurs a passage where Paul appears, rather vehemently, to deny women the right to speak in church, which seems at variance with what he had earlier said in 11.5. Montgomery interprets this passage as a quotation from the earlier Corinthian letter to Paul. "'In your congregation,' you write, 'as in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silence . . . 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?" She has good reasons for this approach. We know that at other points Paul is quoting from the Corinthian letter addressed to him, giving the viewpoints of his opponents, as in 1 Cor 8.1, 4; 10.23; and probably 7.1; see the handling of these passages in NEB and TEV. So why not here? Further, the Greek particle beginning v. 36 is often used, as in Rom 3.29 and 1 Cor 9.6, 10.22, to indicate that either the statement preceding or the one following has to be false.¹⁰ In Montgomery's interpretation, Paul is

⁸ For a good review of the arguments, see Bernadette Brooten, "'Junia . . . Outstanding among the Apostles' (Romans 16:7)" in Leonard and Arlene Swidler, eds. *Women Priests* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 141-144.

⁹ The footnote in TEV refers to her as "June." This is a personal privilege the translator, Robert G. Bratcher, allowed himself; his wife is June.

¹⁰ See David W. Odell-Scott, "Let the Women Speak in Church, an egalitarian interpretation of 1 Cor. 14:33b-36," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* XIII (July, 1983), 90-93. Odell-Scott was apparently unaware of being anticipated by Montgomery.

hardly forbidding women to speak in church; he is actually condemning those who do forbid them to speak!

At 1 Tim 2.15 we have the uncomfortable passage which tells us that in spite of the fact that Eve was the first to sin, women can still attain salvation—by bearing children. Montgomery lends a clever touch to this: “Notwithstanding she will be saved by the Child-bearing; (so will they all), if they continue in faith and love . . .” This possibility is allowed by the footnote in RSV. It makes the verse refer to a woman’s bearing of the child Jesus (notice Montgomery’s capital C). She makes this more explicit by adding to the text “(so shall they all),” thus making it clear that men receive salvation by the same token.

One might even add to this list of passages a brief phrase in Montgomery’s one-page introduction to the small volume, where she indicates that one of her purposes was to make the New Testament available “in a form easy to be carried in the pocket or in a hand-bag.” I’m not sure any male translator would have thought to have added the reference to a hand-bag.

Personally I am uncomfortable with the translation of 1 Tim 2.15, but the other passages cited certainly represent options which translators should consider. It is impossible to be dogmatic about any of them, but any translation providing alternative translations in footnotes should take seriously the possibilities opened here. Mrs. Montgomery is said to have been a delightful, quick-witted lady. I’m sure it would have been a pleasure to know her. There is nothing of the “feminine” about her translation; it is the work of a competent scholar. Yet she is a harbinger of directions in feminist biblical interpretation today. She deserves a wider audience, and Judson Press is to be commended for continuing to make her work available.

JEFFREY B. GIBSON

MARK 8.12a: WHY DOES JESUS “SIGH DEEPLY”?

It is recorded by Mark that when faced with the demand from the Pharisees for a “sign from heaven”, Jesus “sighed (or groaned) deeply in his spirit” (*anastenaxas tō pneumati autou*, Mk 8.12a). What is the significance of this action? What emotion does this particular response specifically express?

The suggestion usually made by commentators is that Jesus’ “sighing” expresses his sense of exasperation and anger at the obstinacy of the Pharisees who,