Reviews


Julia Smith (1792–1878) may be best known in folklore for her pet cows, her handmade quilt, and her civil disobedience through tax evasion; but Emily Sampson’s depiction of Julia Smith reveals contributions significant to biblical, feminist, and literary scholarship. On page 1 of her introduction, Sampson tells us that, when she first saw the name Julia Smith, she grew “angry, even enraged, that I had not heard of her” after more than twenty years studying the Judeo-Christian Bible, twelve of those as a graduate student (xi). Sampson channels this anger into an intense study of Smith’s life and work. With Her Own Eyes: The Story of Julia Smith, Her Life, and Her Bible gives scholars unfamiliar with Smith reason to delight in this recovery effort, and even impetus, among those with fluency in Latin or Greek or French, to expand upon this investigation. Scholars interested in more than folklore can learn how the legendary tale of the tax collector seizing Smith’s cows (who ran to her when she called them by name) and auctioning them off far below their value to pay her debt, and Smith’s subsequent struggle to find legal representation from male attorneys, directly relate to Smith’s publishing one of her five translations of the Bible: through each of these endeavors Smith challenged patriarchal politics in her hometown that raised property taxes only on the town’s unmarried women, who could not vote. Sampson succeeds in moving Smith from an obscure, eccentric figure in local lore to a woman who undertook an extraordinary project both reflective and independent of her cultural zeitgeist.

In two nearly equally long sections of six chapters each, Sampson illuminates Smith’s life and contributions. The first section provides biographical information on the nineteenth-century Smith family in Glastonbury, Connecticut. Sampson’s helpful notes indicate that the Historical Society of Glastonbury holds primary documents including the Smith Family Papers, pictures, and portraits. The family home in which Smith lived from 1796, at age four, to 1878, the year of her death, was designated a national historic landmark in 1975. Smith’s was a family deeply infused with Protestant American values in their faith and individualized Bible study. They were, however, largely un-churched despite temporary interests in Sandemanianism and Millerism (8, 36–41). Julia Smith, like other nineteenth-century reformers, taught at a girl’s school and involved herself in abolitionism and women’s suffrage, for which she spoke at various state’s meetings, including the Connecticut State Suffrage Association when she was over ninety years old (72). However, unlike many female contemporaries, she bore no children and married late, a month before her eighty-seventh birthday. Smith’s Bible translation from Hebrew into English, used to demonstrate her intelligence to an oppressive patriarchal system, ironically results in her April 9, 1879, marriage to Amos A. Parker, who had begun a correspondence with her following the publication (66–67).
Sampson indicates that Americans’ access to Hebrew and Greek and nineteenth-century American women’s access to language studies, higher education, and translation were limited (41–45, 144). It is therefore all the more remarkable how Smith’s knowledge of Hebrew exceeded that of many divinity school students (107). We learn of Smith’s self-taught acquisition of languages, her prolific reading of the Bible and other texts (appendix C features titles from Smith’s known reading list), and her early comparative biblical studies involving reading the Old Testament three times every year and the New Testament eleven times (17). Sampson also provides a context for Smith’s 1845–60 Bible translations and her spring 1876 translation published with “1,170 double-columned pages” (62). Notably, women engaged themselves in every stage of that translation’s production: Smith literally translated a Hebrew version of the Bible, with other women typesetting, printing, and correcting the proofs of her translation (62). Smith’s Bible translation, Sampson argues, stands as a feminist achievement that, perhaps unwittingly, responded to Sarah Grimké’s 1837 call for feminist scholarship of the Bible (156).

The second section of With Her Own Eyes locates Smith’s published translation from a Hebrew version of the Bible among other translations, especially English-language ones. Sampson summarizes the transmission history of the Judeo-Christian Bible, including translations by Aquila, Martin Luther, and by women such as Elizabeth I. Translating the Bible in its entirety and from three different languages sets Smith apart from other translators (78, 86–87, 137–38), including founding father Charles Thomas (1792–1821), about whom Sampson provides an interesting biographical sketch to contrast his educational, social, and political circumstances with Smith’s. Sampson also highlights the distinction between versions and translations of the Bible, the former being a revision whereas the latter is an original work, and among translation styles: the literal word-for-word translation called formal correspondence, which Smith used, and the free translation called dynamic equivalence, which we find in the King James Version (KJV) that overshadowed any other English translations made during the nineteenth century (144, 153).

Further, Sampson explains that concordant translations such as Smith’s prove awkward because, when a translator opts to use the same English word every time she/he sees a certain Hebrew word, the process fails to account for multivalent words in the original version and can, thus, distort meanings (97, 99, 154). Despite the high level of concordance in Smith’s translations, inconsistencies arise in Smith’s use of names and place names (98); however, she consistently translates “Eve” as “Life” and was perhaps the first to do so (108). Smith’s also predates later versions of the Bible such as the Easy-to-Read Version (ERV) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV) with her translation of “agape” as “love,” not “charity,” and with her modernization of third person verbal conjugations such as the use of “says” rather than “saith” (114). Smith’s literal, concordant translations distinguish her from bowdlerizers such as Noah Webster, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the translators of the ERV because Smith forthrightly presents the vulgar and the obscene (100). They also place her translation ahead of the New Revised Standard Version and contrast her with the KJV in passages such as Solomon 1:5 because Smith always translates “waw” as “and,” giving the reading “I am black and beautiful” rather than its earlier renderings “I am black but beautiful” (112–13). While this rendering accords with Smith’s abolitionist efforts (34–36), her consistency belies a political agenda. For the same reason that she uses concordance and a literal translation, Smith avoids supplying missing words and using the present tense, which Hebrew lacks, instead believing that the missing elements will heighten the reader’s search into God’s mystery.
Sampson provides excerpts to illustrate that this choice can intensify readings of the Psalms and the Song of Solomon, with their compact temporal frames, even though it proves confusing with other scriptures (110–11). Chapter 12 provides samples of Smith’s unpublished translations, including texts outside the Protestant canon along with the Ten Commandments and Psalm 1; for the latter, Sampson provides three different Smith translations, each from a different source language.

Sampson acknowledges that modern biblical scholarship would deem Smith’s private, devotional translations below acceptable standards. However, Sampson challenges readers to follow Smith’s courageous, faithful model. The struggle or uncertainty that arises by looking at variations in texts undermines our complacency and “provides a warning against the smugness that leads a casual reader to don the prophetic mantle too quickly and to pronounces too facilely, ‘thus says the Lord’” (103). Sampson’s conclusion suggests that as long as communities continue to read the Bible its influence will persist: “Language changes, new manuscripts are discovered, artifacts are found, new interpretations are put forth. The Bible endures because it is read. In each generation it is read differently, but it is preserved because it continues to speak to the communities of the faithful and, even in a world that considers itself divorced from Scripture, its influence persists” (157).

The weakest aspects of Sampson’s book are its limited index, the occasional absence of effective transitions from one thought to the next within a paragraph and when moving from section 1 to section 2 or from chapter 6 to 7 (24, 25, 79, 76–77), and, more significantly, her slapdash literary analyses in the first chapters. At one point, she presents “random” selections from Smith’s diary, without explaining that approach (21). She seems to repudiate her own remark, however, by the political nature of an excerpt on segregated Sunday schools. After Smith’s excerpted words “I taught the negroes. Zephina and Laurilla [Smith’s sisters] went to the other Sunday school this afternoon,” Sampson states the obvious: “This entry indicates the Sunday schools were segregated” (22). Then, typical of the first part of her book, she briskly moves on, without further treatment of the topic, to another, dissimilar diary entry. Such carelessness disappears in the second part of the book, in which Sampson showcases her expertise in fascinating ways. She excels at metacriticism, evaluating reviews and scholarship on Smith starting with Smith’s contemporaries and continuing to the present. Sampson acknowledges that Smith’s life and work clearly merit attention from interdisciplinary approaches, including those of the feminist historian, biblical scholar, and literary critic (129). While Sampson attempts such an interdisciplinary approach with great success compared to her predecessors, her strength lies in being the first scholar with a thorough knowledge of Hebrew to explore Smith’s translations of the Bible from Hebrew.

Like a thread binding pieces of a quilt, each of the twelve book chapters and the conclusion begin with an epigraph quoting scripture translated and published by Smith. Each quotation relates to the chapter at hand in a poetic way. Chapter 1, “The Family Tree,” opens with Exodus 20:12: “Honor thy father and thy mother, So that thy days shall be prolonged Upon the land which Jehovah thy God Gave to thee” (1). However, the most fortunate epigraph-induced effect is increasing the accessibility of Smith’s original work for readers who lack immediate access to Smith’s published translation or to the manuscripts of her four other translations: another one from Hebrew, two from the Septuagint or LXX (in Greek), and one from the Vulgate (in Latin). Sampson’s appendix...
A supplies the chronology for Smith’s Bible translations, and appendix B almost presents a project for an interested scholar trained in Latin or Greek by describing in which boxes the Connecticut Historical Society holds Smith’s various translations as well as Smith’s KJV Bible with its elaborate color-coded marginalia (each language corresponding to its own color). At the same location, scholars can view Smith’s meteorological journals and diaries; the latter, written in French—a language her lawyer father and teacher mother spoke—still await translation for the period May 1825 through December 1842 (174). All in all, when it comes to Biblical scholarship and historical details, Sampson provides us with an engaging, convincing study that might well inspire further scholarship on Julia Smith.

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Published to mark the bicentennial of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1804–64) birth, Hawthorne and the Real contains new essays by many of the most prominent scholars currently working on the author’s life and work. Millicent Bell, the volume’s editor, explains in a brief preface, ‘I did not propose any overall unitary thematic topic or common approach. Yet, as it turned out, most of the essays submitted hung together to a striking degree—confirming our sense that we had a Hawthorne to call particularly “ours”’ (vii–viii). As the title of the volume suggests, this early-twenty-first-century Hawthorne reflects the insights and concerns of new historicism. Loudly rejecting the Richard Chase/Richard Poirier reading of Hawthorne as a “citizen of somewhere else” who fled the social and political realities of antebellum life, Hawthorne and the Real (like so much Hawthorne criticism from the past two decades) reveals how the author’s work speaks in dynamic, if often ambiguous, ways to historically specific questions such as slavery and race, masculinity, gender equality, political unrest in America and abroad, and market capitalism.

Largely eschewing essay-length discussions of individual texts, most of the pieces here use specific historical or biographical contexts to locate new meanings in the thematic preoccupations of Hawthorne’s fiction, an approach that makes the collection readable, engaging, and potentially valuable to a range of audiences. In “Hawthorne and Politics (Again): Words and Deeds in the 1850s,” Michael T. Gilmore situates Hawthorne’s notorious suspicion toward political and social activism in the light of a political climate in which “language has been so debased by anti-slavery militancy that it has no proper place in politics at all” (27). While Gilmore illustrates how Hawthorne’s campaign biography of his friend Franklin Pierce attempts to separate “discursive agility” from “the practical realm of politics,” he also reminds us that Hawthorne well understood that “the literary possesses an anarchic energy dangerous to civic peace” (28). The essay thus exposes the tension between Hawthorne’s desire to separate literary artistry from

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