

Note: This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Ko, Grace. "Smith, Louise Pettibone (1887–1981)." In *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, edited by Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, pages 457-459. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012.

■ **Smith, Louise Pettibone** (1887–1981)

Louise Pettibone Smith, born in Ogdensburg, New York, was a biblical scholar, professor, author, translator, book reviewer, and social activist. “Politics” was no strange word to Smith since her family had strong ties to the Republican Party: her grandfather was one of the founders of the Abolition Society in central New York State, and her father was an editor of the Republican paper in northern New York. Yet later in her life her social consciousness led her to campaign against some of the Republican policies.

Smith attended Bryn Mawr College, receiving her bachelor’s degree in 1908, her master’s degree in 1912, and her doctorate in Semitic languages and Palestinian archaeology in 1917, with her thesis titled “The Messianic Ideal of Isaiah.” From 1908 to 1911 she taught English and Latin at Hardin College in Mexico, Missouri. From 1913 to 1914 she held the Thayer Fellowship of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. In 1915 she joined the faculty at Wellesley College as a member of the Department of Biblical History, a position she held until 1953, when she was appointed professor emerita.

Smith, a gifted linguist, translated and made available to the English-speaking world the works of some significant German scholars. Her translations include Rudolf Bultmann’s *Jesus and the Word* (1934) and *Faith and Understanding* (1969); Hans Hofmann’s *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (1956); and Karl Barth’s *Theology and Church* (1962). In 1958 she and Joseph Haroutunian cotranslated *Calvin: Commentaries* from Latin into English. Smith later acknowledged these great theologians for their influence on her thinking and teaching.

Smith’s academic publications were dispersed in the pages of journals, reviews, and commentaries. In many of her works, she employed historical and literary criticism of the Bible. She also consulted other ancient Near Eastern literatures and Jewish literature, such as the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah. She did not show any “feminine trait” in her work. In “The Book of Ruth,” on which Smith collaborated with James T. Cleland, it was almost impossible to distinguish her work from that of her male counterpart. She was profoundly influenced by Calvin, whose social ethics, she claimed, “were more demanding than even the ‘Social Gospel’ at its best” (*Diamond Jubilee*, 5). Her article “The Book of Micah” (1952) demonstrates how Calvin’s ethics

had shaped her perspective on issues such as social injustice and civil liberty. At times her exposition of the prophetic messages in Micah led to criticism of her own government's policy. For example, commenting on Mic. 2:8–11, Smith accused the US government of using extreme measures to silence the voices of Cold War dissidents: "In a time of peace the nation's actions are those of war, an indictment which is especially timely with the death penalty for espionage, the denial of the right of reasonable bail, and the suppression of free speech and free assembly" (219).

Recognized as a distinguished biblical scholar by her peers, Smith did graduate work at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, at Radcliffe College, and in Germany at Halle, Bonn, and Marburg. From 1944 to 1945 she took a brief break from her academic profession to join the American Association for Greek War Relief, working for the UN Relief and Rehabilitation effort at a Greek refugee camp in Palestine for six months and teaching English at Pierce College in Athens for four months.

Her involvement in the civil liberties struggle in the United States began when Smith saw similarities between what was happening in her own country and what she had experienced in 1936 while she was in Germany, studying the relation of the German churches, the "Confessional Church" in particular, to the Hitler regime. Her social advocacy was deeply rooted in the teachings of the Pentateuch and especially in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, which teaches justice for all (Lev. 24:22) and love for the sojourners (Lev. 19:33–34). In 1951 she was elected cochair of the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born, which served to protect many innocent naturalized American citizens from injustice and deportation. After her retirement, Smith worked tirelessly, traveling throughout the country and speaking to numerous groups, seeking to instill the hope and promise of a just and free society in which there is one law for the sojourner and for the native. Smith wrote *Torch of Liberty: Twenty-Five Years in the Life of the Foreign Born in the U.S.A.* (1959) to document the twenty-five years of the committee's history and struggle.

Smith was a long-standing member of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). In 1915 she joined the SBL, and in 1917 she was the first woman to publish an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. From 1950 to 1952 she served as secretary of the society (the second woman holding an executive committee position in the SBL) and in 1951 represented the society at the Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in New York. Her dedication and achievements in the field of biblical studies were honored by the SBL during its centenary celebration in 1980.

Bibliography

Lehmann, Paul. "Louise Pettibone Smith, Rudolf Bultmann, and Wellesley." Pages 91–101 in *Bultmann Retrospect and Prospect: The Centenary Symposium at Wellesley*, edited by Edward C. Hobbs. Harvard Theological Studies 35. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.

- Louise Pettibone Smith Birthday Committee. *Louise Pettibone Smith Diamond Jubilee Testimonial Dinner, October 12, 1962*. New York: Louise Pettibone Smith Birthday Committee, 1962.
- Saunders, Ernest W. *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880–1980*. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982.
- Smith, Louise Pettibone. "The Book of Micah." *Interpretation* 6 (1952): 210–27.
- . "The Messianic Ideal of Isaiah." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 36 (1917): 158–212.
- . *Torch of Liberty: Twenty-Five Years in the Life of the Foreign Born in the U.S.A.* New York: Dwight-King, 1959.
- Smith, Louise Pettibone, and James T. Cleland. "The Book of Ruth." In vol. 2 of *The Interpreter's Bible*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953.

— GRACE KO