


Ruth Albrecht

Habershon, Ada Ruth (1861–1918)

Ada Ruth Habershon was the youngest of four surviving children born into a wealthy Plymouth Brethren family in London, England. Her father, Samuel Osborne Habershon (1825–89), was a prominent physician who practiced and taught medicine and authored scores of articles and several monographs on medical subjects. In a manner atypical of most Plymouth Brethren, the Habershons afforded their daughter an exposure to the arts and the broader world of evangelicalism. In her youth, Habershon spent three and a half years studying at the Female School of Art (later to become part of the Royal College of Art) in South Kensington, London. While the family worshiped among the Brethren, they also frequented the Metropolitan Tabernacle of the Baptist preacher Charles H. Spurgeon, who became a close family friend. In 1884, Ada Habershon participated in the London evangelistic crusade of American evangelists D. L. Moody and Ira Sankey, and two decades later in that of R. A. Torrey and Charles Alexander (1905). When Alexander (the song leader in Torrey’s crusade) asked Habershon to write hymns for him, she eventually provided him with just fewer than a thousand.

Despite intermittent periods of illness, Habershon was energetically involved in many areas of Christian ministry. Along with her parents, and following her formal education, she devoted herself to the work of Gray’s Yard Ragged Church and Schools, one of the many charitable schools that offered free Christian and secular education to the poor in Victorian England. Following the death of her parents in 1889, Habershon’s work expanded into other areas, including two North Sea voyages aboard Dr. Wilfred Grenfell’s hospital ships. For a time she acted as the honorary finance secretary of the London YWCA, where she taught Bible studies and raised funds for the construction of the
organization's headquarters. It was also during this period that she began to
direct and publish on biblical subjects.

At the Keswick Convention of 1892, Habershon was reintroduced to D. L.
Moody, who asked her to annotate a Bible for him. This she did, basing her
work on notes she had entered in the margins of her own Bible and those
lent to her by other preachers and Bible teachers. What followed was a re-
quest from Moody to come to the United States, deliver the Bible, and give
lectures to students at his Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies (Northfield,
MA). In the summer and fall of 1895 Habershon spent three months living in
Moody's home in Northfield and giving talks to the women of the seminary.
In September she traveled to Chicago, where she spent time at Moody's Bible
Institute for Home and Foreign Missions and lectured to women's groups at
Moody's Chicago Avenue Church.

Returning to England, Habershon commissioned a model of the tabernacle
and traveled with it, giving talks under the auspices of the YWCA. When
poor health ended her itinerant speaking, she turned her attention to hymn
writing, Bible study, and publishing. In the years that followed, she produced
at least eight books and over a thousand hymns and poems, numerous
articles in religious magazines, as well as booklets on such subjects as doctrinal
error, dispensational eschatology, and the gospel message. In 1912, Habershon
founded the Women's Branch of the Prophecy Investigation Society, regularly
presenting papers at its twice-annual meetings and serving as its honorary
secretary until her death in 1918.

Habershon's typological and intensely christocentric approach to inter-
preting Scripture limits the kinds of questions she asks of the text and the
issues she sees as raising. While the subjects she covers are wide ranging,
Habershon focuses on genres where the typological approach is most fruitfully
applied. Thus her works include studies on the priests and Levites, the taber-
nacle, parables, and the use of the Old Testament in the New. Conspicuously
absent is any systematic treatment of Pauline material, Wisdom literature, or
other plainly didactic genres. Even apocalyptic literature, fertile ground for
gospel speculation by many within Habershon's dispensationalist circle,
only receives a typological treatment at her hand. In her writing on Scripture,
Habershon does not emphasize female characters or concerns, nor does she
address issues of patriarchy or power.

Despite her tendency to read Scripture symbolically, Habershon's work is
everywhere systematizing and analytical. Never in her published material does
Habershon work through a book sequentially. Rather, material across large
surveys of Scripture is sorted, grouped, and analyzed. Typical of this approach
are The Study of the Parables (1923) and The Study of the Miracles (1911). In
the former volume, Habershon examines the parables under chapters such as
"Pictures of Men in the Parables," "The Setting of the Parables," and "The
Trinity in the Parables." Approaching the material in this way, she sometimes
looks at the same passage from several different vantage points. This multiple

treatment of Scripture is not at all problematic, however, for her understand-
ing of the depth and divine character of Scripture meant that it could sustain
multiple meanings and approaches (Study of Parables, 255–57).

Varying degrees of apologetic interest also characterize Habershon's work.
In her introduction to The Bible and the British Museum (1909), she stresses
the goal of providing a guide that would encourage Bible study and strengthen
the faith of the reader (viii). To this end, the blackened remains of Ashurba-
nipal's palace are highlighted as evidence for the dependability of the prophecy
concerning the destruction of Nineveh given through Nahum (33; see, e.g.,
Nah. 3:13, 15). Elsewhere in this work a display of Egyptian deities prompts a
discussion of the plagues as attacks on specific Egyptian gods in a way that
shows a historical context for the biblical account (51–52).

Apologetic interest is also evident in Habershon's typological works; the
manner in which the various types interconnect is evidence for her that the
entire system is inspired by the Holy Spirit (Study of the Types, iii). As a
result, the study of types becomes a "sure antidote for the poison of the so-
called 'Higher Criticism'" (21). Habershon's interest in typology was also
motivated by a desire to promote "simple truths of God's Word" such as the
idea of substitutionary atonement (10)—a doctrine for which she found ample
support in the tabernacle and its sacrifices.

Habershon's ordered mind, remarkable knowledge of Scripture, and superb
memory are applied to greatest effect in her study of typology. In arguing for
Joseph as a type of Christ, for example, she lists no fewer than 129 parallels
between the two figures (169–74). For Habershon, typology differs from alle-
gory in that the former is based on historical events reflecting divine intention
while the latter is not (11–12). In practical terms, however, her treatment of
various narratives shows much of the detailed correspondences characteristic
of the allegorical method.

Habershon's treatment of Gen. 24 well illustrates her approach. Here she
takes Isaac—the "only" and "well-beloved" son of Abraham, who survives the
altar on Mount Moriah—to be a type of Christ, the Son of God, who moves
from death to life. With this as the starting point, the search for a bride for
Isaac is read christologically; the father's servant sent to procure a bride for the
son symbolizes the Holy Spirit, who calls a people to be the bride of Christ.
The journey of Rebekah from her homeland to Canaan is understood in terms
represents the manner in which union with Christ calls the church out of the world.
Along the way, Habershon is not averse to drawing on passages in widely disparate
categories to strengthen the connections she is trying to make. In the case of
Gen. 24, for example, she employs John 16:14, "He shall receive of Mine,
and shall show it unto you," to draw a parallel between the gifts given by the
servant to Rebekah and the blessings of Christ that pass through the Holy
Spirit to the church. On occasion, such connections take on an almost rabbinc
flavor, exploiting similarities in vocabulary to the exclusion of any connections in context. For example, commenting on the scene in which Rebekah’s family asks the servant and Rebekah to remain a while longer (“Hinder me not” [Gen. 24:56]), Habershon cites Heb. 3:7 (“The Holy Ghost saith, ‘To-day’”) to bolster the connection between the urging of the Holy Spirit and the servant who wishes to depart immediately. In Habershon’s use, the two widely separated passages become almost a single sentence—the servant’s reply to the family, “Hinder me not” (Gen. 24:56) being completed by “The Holy Ghost saith, ‘To-day’” of Heb. 3:7. In this case, there is no connection between the Hebrews passage and the episode of Abraham’s servant other than the unconnected appearance of the word “servant” in Heb. 3:5 and the general sense of immediacy (Study of the Types, 143-45).

Habershon’s interpretative approach and denominational background did not leave her intellectually cloistered. For her context, she shows a remarkable accommodation to the theory of evolution, which by then had firmly taken root in the scientific establishment. In her section on “Creation of Life” in The Study of the Miracles (1911), Habershon states, “‘Natural selection’ and ‘the survival of the fittest’ may be part of His [God’s] method of governing, controlling, and developing the species He has made; but life, fitness, and power to survive come alone from Him” (101). Although this by no means constitutes a wholesale endorsement of Darwinian evolution, it nonetheless affirms in large part the mechanism Darwin had advanced as the means by which evolution took place. Within Plymouth Brethren thinking, this accommodation represented a significant shift from prochronism—the idea that the earth was created with the appearance of age—the position laid out a half century earlier in Creation-Omphalos (1857) by the Brethren marine biologist Philip Gosse (1810–88).

Despite her extensive social work and Bible teaching among women, Habershon does not seem to have written with only a female audience in mind. Prefaces to her works, written by leading evangelical figures of the day such as Sir Robert Anderson and James M. Gray of Moody Bible Institute, consistently recommend her books to a broad audience. Furthermore, her own introductions generally avoid the professions of humility found in the works of many other female writers of the era. The fact that as a Brethren woman she eschewed the then-common practice of publishing semi-anonymously under her initials suggests a woman confident in her abilities and willing to share her work with any and all who would consider it. In the United Kingdom, Habershon’s books were regularly, if sometimes tepidly, reviewed in publications such as The Churchman, The Expository Times, and, in one instance, The Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement. Only a few of Habershon’s titles remain in print today. While most of her hymn repertoire has been forgotten, her song, “Will the Circle be Unbroken?” became an American gospel favorite when it was reworked by country music pioneer A. P. Carter and is sometimes erroneously attributed to him.

Bibliography

—Brian P. Irwin