



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Katharine Barnwell: How One Woman Revolutionized Modern Missions

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Katharine Barnwell: How One Woman Revolutionized Modern Missions. By Jordan K. Monson. Nashville: B&H Books, 2025. 304 pp.

Last week a friend wrote to me about how Katharine Barnwell sacrificially gave up her single room at a conference because she could not sleep. I never met Katharine Barnwell, known as “Mama Katy,” but I have the privilege of writing a review of the first full-length biography of her life by Jordan K. Monson. Monson draws attention to the fact that although many outside of Bible translation circles have never heard of Katy Barnwell, her influence has been, and continues to be, as wide as that of Billy Graham or Mother Teresa, shaping Bible translation and Christian ministry throughout the world.

Monson begins with Barnwell’s early years in Britain during World War II, continuing through her academic training in linguistics, which then led to her work in Nigeria starting in the 1960s. The biography describes her first experiences living in a remote African village and learning a local language. By the 1980s, Barnwell was traveling around Africa and around the world, training others to do translation work, eventually becoming the SIL International Translation Coordinator based in Dallas, Texas. Finally, Monson documents her move from SIL to Seed Company in order to help accelerate worldwide Bible translation while still remaining deeply connected with the SIL/Wycliffe ecosystem.

Having found and developed her love of linguistics, Barnwell was a pioneer in the training and enabling of local translators, facilitating communities to lead the work of translating the Bible themselves into their own languages. Rejecting the idea of foreign missionaries translating the Bible, her focus was on training mother-tongue translators, thereby empowering local communities, local leadership, and local churches. She did this through her teaching, her writing, and her personal mentorship of many. She also developed courses that trained thousands of translators worldwide, building capacity in others. She led inspiringly but not forcefully, remaining kind and caring of others, without attracting attention to herself. She was described as a mother, a mentor, and a benefactor.

Monson records and describes Barnwell's key achievements in the world of Bible translation. The three core principles of her translation philosophy—accuracy, clarity, and naturalness—have become standard in modern Bible translation training. Her methods of local empowerment have meant that translation progress has been greatly accelerated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Her phrase, “meaning-based translation,” helped non-linguists understand basic translation principles. Her training was revolutionary—a hands-on approach, mentoring translators working through the Bible, solving translation problems as they arose. Her book *Bible Translation: An Introductory Course in Translation Principles* has been one of the most widely used textbooks in the world of Bible translation. Barnwell also pioneered the “cluster model” approach to Bible translation and to the Jesus film, allowing multiple different language teams to train simultaneously, dramatically reducing translation time. The commentary series “Translator's Notes” began under her leadership, aimed at local translators and the day-to-day translation issues that they face, followed by the work on key biblical terms which became SIL's Translator's Workplace. Competency-based Bible consultancy became recognized under Barnwell's leadership, and she also played a key role in the development of Paratext, software used by Bible translators worldwide.

Monson describes many personal challenges that Barnwell faced during her life, including illness, civil war, political unrest, and even armed robbery. Despite these trials, Barnwell remained committed and faithful, serving with remarkable dedication throughout her life. Monson highlights Barnwell's resilience and long-term commitment. Barnwell was known for her overriding positivity, optimism, and cheerfulness, refusing to criticize others and remaining humble. She was hospitable, welcoming others frequently into her home.

Monson's writing style is engaging, if overly dramatic at times, and his book is an easily accessible and captivating read. Monson mixes his description of Barnwell's life with his own observations and conclusions about Bible translation and the global missions movement. It is clear that he spent time with Barnwell and has done extensive field-based research. Monson emphasizes her achievements and does not devote much attention to any failures or controversial moments. This is an inspiring and compelling read about the mother of modern Bible translation and her legacy to the world of Bible translation and modern global missions. It will be of interest both for those with no knowledge about Bible translation and for those who knew “Mama Katy” personally.

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