

James Moffatt, Minister of Broughty Ferry East United Free Church

By Professor Hugh M Begg

Introduction

James Moffatt, was the minister of what is now Broughty Ferry New Kirk between 1907 and 1911. He was one of three biblical scholars and foremost theologians of their day who served as Ministers at Broughty Ferry United Free Church.

Born on 4 July 1870, James Moffatt was educated at Glasgow Academy and Glasgow University before being ordained in 1896. In 1907 Moffatt came from the United Free Church of Scotland in Dundonald, Ayrshire to Broughty Ferry. His *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, a comprehensive survey of contemporary biblical scholarship, appeared in 1911 while he was minister at what was then Broughty Ferry East United Free Church. In 1911, following 15 years as a parish minister, Moffatt was appointed Professor of Greek and New Testament Exegesis at Mansfield College, Oxford. He returned to Glasgow in 1915 as Professor of Church History at the United Free Church College. Moving on from there, he served as Washburn Professor of Church History at the Union Theological Seminary, New York from 1927 until his retirement in 1939. The Reverend Professor James Moffatt DD DLitt passed away on 27 June, 1944 in New York aged 73.

The following paragraphs focus briefly on four aspects of Moffatt's life: his time as Minister at Broughty Ferry United Free Church; some notes on his work as a translator of the New Testament while there; some further notes on his work as a translator and biblical scholar; and a few concluding remarks on his legacy and current reputation.

Minister at Broughty Ferry United Free Church

When Moffatt arrived in the early years of the twentieth century Broughty Ferry had completed its evolution from fishing village at the mouth of the River Tay to a prosperous suburb of Dundee by then characterised as "juteopolis". An important part of that transformation was the proliferation of churches built to serve the growing resident population and those who came as day visitors and holiday makers. Following the Disruption, Broughty Ferry had its share of secessions and reunions and the enormous wealth of some residents ensured that churches were built to reflect the various divisions. In 1900 the majority of Free Church congregations, including Broughty Ferry East, had united with a smaller denomination, the United Presbyterian Church, to form the United Free Church (McCraw, 2000)

In working on his *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* while serving as a parish minister, Reverend Moffatt was continuing a tradition of combining pastoral care with scholarship at the United Free Church. The church to which Moffatt came in 1907 had benefited from a number of distinguished ministers two of whom went on to be leading scholars in the Free Church College in Glasgow. Reverend Andrew Balmain (Sandy) Bruce wrote his first notable exegetical work, *The Training of the Twelve*, while in Broughty Ferry before he was elevated to the Chair of Apologetics and New Testament Exegesis in 1875. There he was a formative influence on James Denney and in 1886, no doubt on the recommendation of his mentor and predecessor, Denney was called to the East Free Church. He was a popular preacher; and some of his sermons were published in two

volumes of *The Expositor's Bible*. He went on to the Chair of Systematic and Pastoral Theology in 1897 (Gorony 2008).

Bruce, Denny and Moffatt were men of great intellect and their work was the subject not only of admiration but also controversy. Moffatt's *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* was an astonishingly wide-ranging survey of contemporary critical scholarship revealed to his fellow scholars as well as the church his liberal standpoint from which he did not deviate throughout his career.

The church to which Moffatt came in 1907 is located on the corner of Queen Street and St Vincent Street. Now the home of Broughty Ferry New Kirk, it was built in 1865 to a design of Andrew Heighon. The building cost some £3,600 (using average earnings as the conversion that would amount to around £2million today) and it provided seating for a congregation of 600. A contemporary newspaper account described the building as *"...the handsomest Presbyterian church of its size that we have yet seen in Scotland. In design it is most elegant; in material it is substantial and harmonious; and in execution most artistic... Between the windows and the corners are buttresses of beautiful proportion which give the church the air of some fine college chapel"*. A vestry and small hall had been added in 1870 in Balmain's time. A substantial manse at 66 Camphill Road was built in 1877 at a cost of £2,500. It was only in 1888, while Denny was Minister, that a harmonium was introduced to replace the use of a precentor in leading the praise (McCraw, 2000).

In an obituary published in *The Expository Times* (to which Moffatt was a regular and prolific contributor) his former colleague, Professor A J Gossip, at the College contributed a word picture of Moffatt as he must have appeared around the time of his ministry in Broughty Ferry: *"Physically, Moffatt was a tall, slim, long-necked figure, with a look of surprised innocence, and a smile, often there, sometimes quick, yet, for the most part breaking slowly and gradually. He carried himself straight and erect, with arms hung rather stiffly by his side, and walked with a gliding kind of motion that took him over the ground with unexpected rapidity.*

Intellectually, he was brilliantly endowed with many talents; and to that was added an immense capacity for work, slow to tire. In his spacious Glasgow study, book-lined to the ceiling, he had three tables, on each of which was gathered the paraphernalia of some subject on which he was working- let us say Tertullian, the New Testament conception of love, and another. He would work for hours with absorbed concentration; and when wearying would rise, stretch himself, stroll to the next table, and refresh his mind with more hours hard toil on the new topic there; and so perhaps on to the third!" (Gossip 1944, page 14)

James Moffatt: Biblical Scholar-New Testament

In 1913 following his appointment to a Chair at Mansfield College, Hodder and Stoughton published Moffatt's translation of the New Testament. His aim was to render the Greek text into plain English; and it is said that he revised his text 6 times before he was satisfied.

The King James Bible was a deeply scholarly work which set out to translate into then current English texts that were seen as divinely inspired. It was completed in 1611 as the result of the splendid efforts of some 50 translators from an array of backgrounds set up in 6 sub-Committees. That it was completed at all was a minor miracle only surpassed by its longevity as the "authorised version" of

the Bible. Moffatt was well aware of the political difficulties endemic in his self-imposed task of presenting an alternative to the authorised version of the New Testament. In the introduction to the 1913 edition he points out: *“Any new translation starts under a special handicap. It appears to challenge in every line the rhythm and diction of an English classic, and this irritates many who have no knowledge of the original.”*

A comparative review demonstrates easily that Moffatt’s text is different from the King James version in some interesting ways. For instance, he rearranged the order of some chapters based on his views about the content, authorship, and historicity of the texts available to him: John chapter 14 in the King James version comes after John 15 and 16 in the Moffatt New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 the King James version relates *“For now we see through a glass, darkly.”* However, most modern translations from the Greek texts, including that of Moffatt’ conclude that the glass referred to is a mirror which, of course, reflects our own image.

Some of the difficulties faced by Moffatt, which he met head on, are exemplified by the following translations of one of the best known and often quoted passages in the New Testament. There is near consensus that Paul is the author of the First Epistle to the Corinthians and that it was written probably around 54 AD while he was in Ephesus. Chapter 13 is concerned principally with the love that Christians should have for each other. In the Greek text, the word *“agape”* is used throughout. This is translated into English as *“charity”* in the King James version; but the word *“love”* is preferred by Moffatt. The translations contained in the King James Version, and the Moffatt Translation are set out below and make interesting comparative reading.

King James Version (1611)

1. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.
2. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
3. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.
4. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,
5. Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
6. Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
7. Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.
8. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.
9. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.
11. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.
12. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.
13. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Moffatt Translation (1913)

1. Thus, I may speak with the tongues of men and of angels but if I have no love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal;
2. I may prophesy, fathom all mysteries and secret lore, I may have such absolute faith that I can move hills from their place, but if I have no love, I count for nothing;
3. I may distribute all I possess in charity, I may give up my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I make nothing of it.
4. Love is very patient, very kind. Love knows no jealousy;
5. Love makes no parade, gives itself no airs, is never rude, never selfish, never irritated, never resentful; love is never glad when others go wrong;
6. Love is gladdened by goodness,
7. Always slow to expose, always eager to believe the best, always hopeful, always patient.
8. Love never disappears. As for prophesying, it will be superseded; as for 'tongues,' they will cease; as for knowledge, it will be superseded.
9. For we only know bit by bit, and we only prophesy bit by bit;
10. But when the perfect comes, the imperfect will be superseded.
11. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I argued like a child; now that I am a man, I am done with childish ways.
12. At present we only see the baffling reflections in a mirror, but then it will be face to face; at present I am learning bit by bit, but then I will understand, as all along I have myself been understood.
13. Thus faith and hope and love last on, these three, but the greatest of all is love.

James Moffatt: Biblical Scholar-Old Testament and Beyond

From 1915 to 1927 Moffatt was Professor of Church History at the University of Glasgow. Notwithstanding criticisms (which continue to this day) the reception of his translation of the New Testament had been generally favourable. Accordingly, he set about translating the Old Testament. In the Introduction to his 1926 edition of *"The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, a*

New Translation" Moffatt wrote: "The aim I have endeavoured to keep before my mind in making this translation has been to present the books of the Old and the New Testament in effective, intelligible English. No translation of an ancient classic can be quite intelligible, it is true, unless the reader is sufficiently acquainted with its environment to understand some of its flying allusions and characteristic metaphors." The attempt to reach out to a modern audience continued. For instance, Moffatt replaced the repetitious "begats" of the King James version with "was the father of"; and, amusingly, Noah's Ark in Genesis is referred to as a "barge".

Particular exception was taken by some to Moffatt's translation of Isaiah 7:14 and its prophecy of a virgin birth. The King James version reads: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive...". Moffatt translates the same passage from the Greek as: "There is a young woman with child..."

From 1927 until 1939 Moffatt was Washburn Professor of Church History at the Union Theological Seminary, in Manhattan, New York. Founded in 1836 it was by then the largest theological college in the world and well on its way to world renown as a centre of liberal Christianity. Recognised at home and abroad as an outstanding scholar, Professor Moffatt was awarded honorary degrees of Doctor of Divinity by the University of Oxford and by the University of St Andrews of which Queens College, Dundee was then a part. He went on to edit a series of commentaries on the New Testament which were published in 17 volumes between 1928 and 1949.

Postscript

The Reverend James Moffatt DD left Broughty Ferry in 1912. Since then the church at 370 Queen Street has benefitted from a succession of renovations and improvements. In 1929 it became Broughty East Church; and in 2005 the congregations of Broughty Ferry St Aidan's and the East Parish Church and were united as The New Kirk.

Moffatt's 1913 New Testament was "the original modern-language Bible". Without decrying the merits of the Authorised Version, Moffatt single handedly initiated a trend towards simpler texts aimed at the general reader. Thus for instance, these led to the publication of The New English Bible a translation into modern English directly from the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic texts. The New Testament was published in 1961, The Old Testament (along with the Apocrypha) followed in 1970, and the whole was significantly amended and republished as the Revised English Bible in 1989.

Nowadays scholars consider some of Moffatt's translations dubious, and recent archaeological discoveries and a fuller understanding of the basic Greek texts have rendered much of his work outdated. Nevertheless, the Moffatt New Testament of 1913 conceived and written during his time as a Minister in Broughty Ferry remains of considerable historical interest.

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Sources and Further Reading

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