

**DEDICATION**

*For Fern Esther and Patricia Joyce  
Daughters of the King*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have always been fascinated by the nature of belief and the spirit of inspiration, and there are many people I would like to thank for believing in me and inspiring this project—more than I can mention here. As the women in this study might say, I have been blessed.

First, to Sandra Gunning, Kerry Larson, Sidonie Smith, and Martha Jones: thank you for being such a supportive, passionate committee. Your keen insights and thoughtful suggestions were crucial at numerous points in my writing process. Thank you for teaching me to better wield the tools of academic craft, sharpening my analysis and deepening my scholarship.

I would also like to thank the University of Michigan for providing me with generous financial support throughout my graduate education that allowed me to devote time to research and writing, including a Rackham Merit Fellowship and a Margaret Kraus Ramsdell Fellowship through the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies; a Community of Scholars Fellowship at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender; a Rackham One-Term Dissertation Fellowship via the Women's Studies department; and through participation in the Dissertation Writing Institute at the Gayle Morris Sweetland Writing Center.

Both of my “home” departments, English and Women's Studies, have provided essential fiscal, emotional, and scholarly support. Indeed, I have been fortunate to have

many mentors and colleagues at the University of Michigan who have stimulated my thinking and taught me a great deal about the joys of academia: Naomi André, Elizabeth Cole, Maria Cotera, Deborah Keller-Cohen, Adela Pinch, Carol Karlsen, Yopie Prins, Sarita See, Anne Curzan, Peggy McCracken, Elizabeth Wingrove, Jonathan Freedman, Maureen McDonnell, Sridevi Nair, Christopher Gauthier, and Molly Hatcher. I am deeply grateful to the faculty, administrative staff, and students in Women's Studies, especially, for making my graduate student life worth living.

Special thanks goes out to my mentors in the English department at the University of Redlands (1998-2002) who encouraged me to pursue graduate school when I was only a “possessed” undergraduate, particularly Claudia Ingram, Daniel Kiefer, William E. McDonald, and Robert N. Hudspeth. And thank you to Emily Culpepper, whose excellent class at Redlands on “Women, Sexuality, and Western Religion” restored my faith in religion as a site of academic inquiry. I would also like to thank Joycelyn Moody for leading an invigorating week-long summer seminar at West Virginia University in June of 2007, “‘The Lord’s Battle I Mean to Fight’: The Politics of African American Piety.” I was privileged to participate in many fascinating conversations during this seminar.

My friends and family have been a constant source of inspiration, encouragement, and ideas. All my love to Jennifer E. Taylor and Emily Hamilton-Honey, whose glorious friendship and professional advice have delighted and sustained me. To my Ann Arbor crew—especially Grace Gheen and Connie Pagedas Soves—thank you for laughing, dancing, and so much more. To Jason, my extraordinary husband, thank you for never letting me give up. To my father, who made me appreciate the intricacies of theology, thanks. And, finally, to my mother, for walking with me every step of this journey: there

are no adequate words to express my gratitude. Thank you for being a fellow scholar and cherished friend.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. “Now Is the Day of Salvation”: Sanctification as Method and Metaphor in Julia A. J. Foote’s <i>A Brand Plucked from the Fire</i> .....	31
3. “Aleaving the World, the Flesh, and the Devil”: Holiness, Celibacy, and Separation from “the World” in Rebecca Cox Jackson’s Autobiographical Writings.....	86
4. Frances E. W. Harper’s Poetic Vocation: Unitarian Theology and Archetypes of Leadership in <i>Moses: A Story of the Nile</i> and Other Selected Poems on Slavery, Temperance, and Spirituality.....	142
5. “I Enjoyed Richly the Spirit of Adoption”: Experiential “Adoption” Theology in Zilpha Elaw’s <i>Memoirs</i> .....	185

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the spiritual writings of four freeborn nineteenth-century African-American women—Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Julia A. J. Foote, and Frances E. W. Harper—establishing connections across genres (autobiography, poetry, and hymnody), time periods (antebellum, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction), and approaches to religious language (prophetic, mystical, devotional, poetic, etc.). Exploring why holiness was attractive to these women, this project examines race and gender as issues that make Protestant Christianity more immediate, urgent, and necessary in their lives and writings.

In order to highlight the function of divinity in these texts and theology-making as self-constitutive, Chapter One (the introduction) proposes the term *auto/theo/graphy*, or self/God/writing. Instead of attending to the act of narration as self-authorizing, autotheography deemphasizes the individual; the author understands herself in relation to and actualized through God, becoming a spiritual and textual agent by means of the divine. In such works, the self is incorporative, organizing heterogeneous sites of religious belief, avowal, and theology—such as sermons, hymns, poetry, dreams and visions, theological treatises—in a multifaceted conception of *theos* (God). Putting pressure on accepted critical categories such as spiritual autobiography and the slave narrative, autotheography is a textual process emphasizing the relationship between the divine, the believer/writer, and the believer-to-be (reader).

Each of the following chapters analyzes the author's use of systematic theology and scriptural interpretation to craft the self in relation to her spiritual and material worlds. Chapter Two argues that, for Foote, the Methodist doctrine of sanctification is a textual metaphoric system that also has the potential to overturn social injustice. Chapter Three explains how Jackson's unique construction of sanctification led her to a theology of celibacy, away from her family and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and to embrace the Shaker religion. Chapter Four contends that, as exemplified in *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, Harper deploys Unitarian theology in first-person and dramatic poems, emphasizing biblical leadership models to inspire holy living. Finally, Chapter Five asserts that Elaw's use of a Pauline-based theological trope, the "spirit of adoption," reveals her ecumenical vision of the church for all Christians.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. And who doesn't believe in it?*

—*Philippe Lejeune*, “The Autobiographical Pact (bis)” (131)

In autobiographical writings detailing her experiences from the mid-1830s, Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871), a prophetic African-American Shaker, describes a vision in which she found herself unable to go on: “a mountain was in my path and the top of it appeared to reach to the heaven” (135). Upon praying to God for help, Jackson “saw the Father” with “the Savior...on His right side,” and “His voice” caused the mountain to dissolve (135).<sup>1</sup> According to a footnote by Jean McMahan Humez, editor of *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (1981), Jackson used the “spiritual metaphor” of the mountain blocking her path in order to “euphemistically” refer to her conflict with her husband over the issue of her conviction that God was calling her to celibacy (135). But is there more going on here than a domestic struggle over sex? What are we to make of Jackson’s claim that she

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, Jackson follows the linguistic machinations of Jesus by using a seemingly unmovable mountain as part of a spiritual metaphor: “for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (*King James Version*, Matthew 17.20). Jackson also references this verse earlier in her text, saying, “with God there is nothing impossible” (96). All biblical citations in this chapter are taken from *The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*, with the exception of references already quoted within the primary text.



actually *saw* the Father while she was still “in the body on earth” (136), a feat that only one or two biblical patriarchs ever accomplished? What would it mean to take Jackson at her word, to see her “I” voice through what she calls her “spirit eye” (136)?

It can be difficult to evaluate the claims of a person whose “spirit eye” is more important to her than her physical senses. Hers is a different kind of vision, an epistemology of faith rather than positivism. The question of “literal” truth—whether or not Jackson experienced the presence of the Father and the Son in a physical reality that could be assessed by others had they been present at the time—is unanswerable. But taking Jackson at her word requires that we recognize the truth-value of her vision, a vision that may function metaphorically in ways that make it difficult to separate tenor and vehicle.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Jackson’s “mountain” vision operates on multiple levels of physical and spiritual corporeality, only one of which may be a cryptic explanation of the increasingly violent sexual tension between Jackson and her husband. Another corporeal level involves the physical body of a free black woman juxtaposed with the incarnate bodies of the Father and the Son. In a more conventional reading, gender and race are brought into focus when we look for evidence of the conflict between Jackson and her husband. However, these identity categories can also be viewed religiously, reading with a “spirit eye”: what does Jackson’s juxtaposition of her body with those of the Father and the Son tell us about her shifting understanding of her own black, female body as a

---

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Bruss asserts in *Autobiographical Acts*, “Under existing conventions, a claim is made for the truth-value of what the autobiography reports—no matter how difficult that truth-value might be to ascertain, whether the report treats of private experiences or publicly observable occasions” (11). Joan Scott approaches the “truth” a bit differently, investigating the challenges of using experience as a foundation for historical inquiry and knowledge production: “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political” (797). I find it provocative to think about what it might mean to historicize a visionary encounter like Jackson’s; what kinds of knowledge can we produce about extrasensory experiences?

particular physical manifestation of an increasingly spiritual self? How does she adapt parts of Shaker theology to her own situation as an “I” called to “bear the truth” while treading the “self-denial path” of celibacy (136)? And how might this theology have sounded to other African-Americans in her hometown of Philadelphia?

Jackson’s writings allow us to see through the spirit-vision of someone who valued an intimate and dynamic relationship with the divine. In her “inspired” narration, we as readers witness her testimony to the power of the Spirit of God at work in her life and theology. In a similar way, the writings of the three other African-American women in this study also highlight the importance of spirituality and religious devotion: Zilpha Elaw (c. 1790-?), an itinerant evangelist who was a Methodist but preached independently of any denomination in the Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic, and Southern states and penned her *Memoirs* in the mid-1840s after a five-year mission to England; Julia A. J. Foote (1823-1900), another itinerant evangelist who preached across the Northeast, Midwest, and Canada, published her autobiography in 1879, continued her preaching career on the West Coast near the end of the century, and was ordained a deacon of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1894 and an elder in 1900; and Frances E. W. Harper (1825-1911), a widely-published poet and essayist who was also a great orator and activist, a prominent member of many social reform organizations, and a member of the Unitarian Church beginning in the 1870s.<sup>3</sup> Although each of these women has a distinct theological focus and a different conception of the workings of the Spirit, all four are concerned with nurturing their capacity for spiritual experience and encouraging their readers to similarly develop a strong relationship with the divine. By

---

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Martha Jones for pointing me in the direction of additional information about Julia Foote’s whereabouts during the late nineteenth century. See *All Bound Up Together* (Jones 186). Also see Alexander Walters’s 1917 autobiography *My Life and Work* (46) and Collier-Thomas (99-100).

gathering and reflecting on their spiritual selves and interactions with the material world in textual forms, these women believed they were doing the Lord's work.

What connects these spiritual texts is their place in a larger "tradition" of black female orators, authors, activists, and preachers for whom Protestant Christianity was a living, viable force that allowed them to pen literature emphasizing the spiritual self in relation to both the material and spiritual worlds.<sup>4</sup> Religion was not just a backdrop for these women; it influenced every part of their daily lives and their vision(s) for the future. For them, the Bible was a textual template through which the believer interacted with God and the larger Christian community, both within and on the fringes of denominational constraints. The writings of these women were personal, theological interventions in an American culture still steeped in the basic tenets of Christian theology and biblical typology, valuing Christian mores and religious sensibility in a way that modern readers may find disconcerting and even suspect.

Perhaps a certain discomfort with biblically-inundated language and overt theological gestures might explain why surprisingly few literary critics have made religion and religiosity the focus of their inquiries when addressing spiritual writings by

---

<sup>4</sup> In referring to a "tradition" of black women, I am standing on the shoulders of previous critics who have used this word to call attention to the importance of black women's literature, point to continuities across that body of literature, distinguish black women's writing from other traditions, investigate trajectories of black feminist thought, and so on. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women" (1987); Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" (1989); Nellie Y. McKay, "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography" (1995); Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980); Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987); Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1989); Frances Smith Foster's *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African-American Women, 1746-1892* (1993); Carla L. Peterson, "Doers of the Word": *African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (1995); more recently, see Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway's essay collection *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (2007).

African-American women.<sup>5</sup> In any event, legitimate concerns about reading black women's texts with an eye toward race and gender politics may result in leaving the "spiritual" aspects by the wayside. To give just one example, religion becomes a parenthetical category in Carla Peterson's statement of the central purpose of her 1995 monograph, *Doers of the Word*: "...the study seeks to recover from scholarly neglect the contributions made by black women to racial uplift efforts in the North from the antebellum era through Reconstruction, to analyze the role of gender (as well as class and religion) in the construction of ideologies of black cultural nationalism during this period" (4). Peterson wants to examine these black women as cultural producers and activists who were a crucial part of what she calls "nineteenth-century black resistance movements" (4), and her point about the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to these women's texts (in her case, literary/historical/anthropological) is well taken (5). However, by positing a "resistance" thesis that makes religion a secondary factor in black women's texts, some of the important dynamics of spiritual experiences and biblical hermeneutics are left behind. Certainly, studies like Peterson's are vital, evaluating the rhetorical strategies of nineteenth-century black women in order to uncover their relationships to social and political issues (abolition, church power dynamics, women's rights, etc.) or to position the writings of these women in a larger tradition of American and/or African-American literature. My project builds on such studies, bringing the themes of gender and race into view simultaneously while looking through the critical lens of the "spirit eye"/"I" constructed in the texts at hand. By allowing the visionary

---

<sup>5</sup> Joycelyn Moody discusses possible reasons for scholarly discomfort with theology—including "a modern academic elitism that rejects all religion as delusional and indefensible," a critical fixation on black "protest literature," and "the stereotype of the black church woman"—in her introduction and conclusion to *Sentimental Confessions* (21, 165-177).

theologies of “I”-voiced texts to influence my analytical approach, this dissertation seeks to change the way we think about African-American spiritual writings and the related processes of conversion and theology-production. Religion need not be read as an affective screen or mask that filters the emotion or activism of the author. Rather, religion can be the central subject for the “I” of autobiographically-inflected spiritual texts.

Of course, not enough critical attention has been paid to African-American women in the American literary canon as a whole, let alone in terms of religiosity. Surveying the field of academic production on spiritual writings by black women often involves taking stock of adjacent disciplines or parallel themes rather than direct criticism on the subject. By drawing on a number of diverse fields, including autobiographical studies, narratology, nineteenth-century poetry, hymnology, denominational and social religious histories, systematic theology, feminist biblical commentary, and African-American women’s history more generally, this dissertation traces religious language and lay theologies by African-American women in what I see as cross-pollinated genres. The secondary material on these texts seems to be lacking in a more comprehensive analysis of why religion is vital to the literary methodologies of these women, and I want to step into the gap.

When surveying literary production by African-American women during the nineteenth century, it is crucial to pay attention to the religious matters that are foregrounded by these women. In the tradition of spiritual autobiography and the conversion narrative, black women’s spiritual writings describe “a journey through sin and damnation to a sense of spiritual fulfillment and arrival in a place of sustaining belief” (Smith and Watson 205). However, such a journey is impossible without God as a

participant, particularly since, as constructed in the text, the conversion of the author leads to God's call for the author to convert others to salvation and/or to convince them of the importance of specific religious principles. To foreground God's role in these texts and theology-making as self-constitutive, I propose the term *auto/theo/graphy*, or self/God/writing. Rather than coming to voice in an individualistic way on her own merits, the subject understands herself in relation to and actualized through God. The subject becomes a spiritual and textual agent by means of the divine.

*Autotheography* is writing the self through systematic theology and the interpretation of scripture. *Theos* here designates "God" and theology production. In such works, the self is incorporative, organizing heterogeneous sites of religious belief, avowal, and theology—such as sermons, hymns, poetry, dreams and visions, theological treatises—in a multilayered and multifaceted conception of *theos*. In this way, autotheography channels religious charisma into a text, for theological clarification, codification, and inspiration. Through autotheography, the believer/writer participates in the process of continual revelation and perfection of him or herself and of others. Rather than interrupting autobiographical narration, therefore, the incorporation of diverse religious texts advances revelation and the cause of holiness. Instead of attending to the act of narration as self-authorizing and self-referential, autotheography deemphasizes the life of the individual, subordinating the individual voice to the voice of God. In this sense, the text is co-authored: self-authored but Christ authorizing.

As the above definition suggests, autotheography is not just a term designating a subgenre of spiritual autobiography. At base, autotheography is a textual *process* emphasizing the relationship between God as co-author, the believer/writer, and the

believer-to-be (reader). The “autotheographical process,” then, transcends distinctions between modes of writing such as prose and poetry, allowing me to bring the poetics of autobiography to bear on spiritual narratives, devotional and religious-themed poetry, and hymnody throughout this dissertation. Connecting traditional autobiography to narrative focalization and the lyric “I” provides a through-line between different kinds of spiritual writings by nineteenth-century black women.<sup>6</sup>

There may be a certain romance to engaging autotheography as a textual process that potentially encompasses many “I” voices across different modes of writing, as it creates yet another term for a specialized critical approach to the autobiographical. However, in proposing this term, I am attempting to tap into some of the inspiring potential of the study of autobiography that Philippe Lejeune refers to in “The Autobiographical Pact (bis)” when he admits to the ideological underpinnings of his critical enterprise:

It’s better to get on with the confessions: yes, I have been fooled. I believe that we can promise to tell the truth; I believe in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it; I believe that my proper name guarantees my autonomy and my singularity...; I believe that when I say “I,” it is I who am speaking: I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. And who doesn’t believe in it? (131)

Despite the fact that Lejeune immediately goes on to recant (“Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject—it is a fantasy”), the impact of these

---

<sup>6</sup> The phrase “traditional autobiography” here refers to the tradition of autobiography in the West, involving a self-authorizing, independent, individuated (Enlightenment) subject who uses non-fiction prose to write about his/her own life or experience in a self-referential way (as outlined in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography*; esp. 2). In a similar way, the “traditional” parameters of spiritual autobiography limit the genre to a conversion narrative in prose “structured around a radical transformation from a faulty ‘before’ self to an enlightened ‘after’ self” (Smith and Watson 192); I am trying to push these boundaries. Other critics have paved the way when it comes to expanding the definition of spiritual autobiography. For example, Joycelyn Moody argues that, as a whole, Maria W. Stewart’s works essentially form a spiritual autobiography in the tradition of the black jeremiad, and they should be evaluated together as such (29).

articles of faith lingers (131). Of course the autobiographical self is a construct on the page, not a means of direct access to the “real,” unadulterated life of the narrator.

Nevertheless, like Lejeune, I confess: “I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person.”

And, taking creative liberties with Lejeune, I believe in the Holy Ghost *in* the first person, the indwelling Spirit of God who speaks through and with the narrating “I” of spiritual texts, because the women in this study believed in that Spirit. As Rebecca Cox Jackson wrote, “I am only a pen in His hand. Oh, that I may prove faithful to the end” (107).

But what did it mean for Rebecca Cox Jackson, Zilpha Elaw, Julia A. J. Foote, and Frances E. W. Harper to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, or to become writing instruments in God’s hands? In order to contextualize their writings, we need to examine two autobiographical traditions that are in dialogue with autotheography: spiritual autobiography and the slave narrative.

Although referring to the English autobiographical tradition, Linda Peterson’s description of the “hermeneutic origin (or basis)” of the genre of spiritual autobiography can also apply to the American case, as both hearken back to a “Protestant tradition of religious introspection” that can be traced to John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) (213).<sup>7</sup> Peterson uses the word “hermeneutic” to emphasize two kinds of interpretation that take place in spiritual autobiographies: “the act of self-interpretation” and the deliberate, thoughtful adoption of “patterns and principles of interpretation from biblical hermeneutics (originally from biblical typology)” (213). Her essay goes on to explain why Victorian women eschewed hermeneutic practices in

---

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Daniel Shea reminds us to look back even further than Bunyan to earlier precedents: “Since Paul and Augustine, indeed since Pentecost, Christians had evangelized in the first person” (88). Yolanda Pierce also examines Paul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus as “the precedent for written conversion narratives” in her introduction to *Hell Without Fires* (1).



general and the genre of spiritual autobiography in particular, citing biblical obstacles (“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But...suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence,” 1 Tim. 2.11-12), exclusionary church practices (being forbidden to preach, interpret scripture, or become ordained), and a growing emphasis on hermeneutics as a specialized academic enterprise (216).

Nineteenth-century American women faced some of the same challenges as their English counterparts when it came to practicing hermeneutics. However, as Nancy Hardesty explains in *Women Called to Witness*, the Second Great Awakening during the early nineteenth century revolutionized the nation’s religious sensibilities, transitioning from “Puritan theology with its predestined elect [that] encouraged a stratified society” to a more democratic revivalism that could lead to social justice: “the experience of conversion and sanctification unleashed a power within Christian society that had the potential to eradicate racial and sexual prejudices” (48, 51). This emphasis on experiential religion helped usher in “a more radically inclusive Christianity,” giving those with less power in society—particularly women and African-Americans—the chance to be heard, testifying to the power of the Holy Spirit through exhortation, preaching, and even the interpretation of scripture (Brekus 158).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as Hardesty, Catherine Brekus, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and others have shown, both black and white women were practicing a kind of Bible-based proto-feminism during the nineteenth century, reinterpreting passages that had been used to keep women silent or subordinate, pointing to strong female figures in the Bible who were leaders and apostles,

---

<sup>8</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas notes the radical potential of holiness and experiential religion, explaining, “some African Americans participated in the most prominent holiness and healing organizations and movements of the nineteenth century, particularly the great revivals and camp meetings associated with white religionists. They recognized its significance, especially its power to liberate” (72).

and expounding verses that held forth the promise of women as preachers and prophets (such as Acts 2.17 and Joel 2.28, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,” and Galatians 3.28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”).<sup>9</sup> As self-declared conduits of the Spirit, women like Elaw, Foote, Jackson, and Harper benefited from (and helped to further) the inclusive Christianity that stemmed from revivalism and an egalitarian hermeneutic principle that was growing during the nineteenth century in America. Unlike the English women Linda Peterson generalizes, the African-American women in this study embraced autobiographical spiritual writing and infused their texts with biblical typology and theological interpretation.

In addition to spiritual autobiography, the slave narrative is another literary institution that should be kept in view when discussing spiritual writings by nineteenth-century black women. If the tradition of spiritual autobiography draws attention to biblical interpretation and a hermeneutics of the self, criticism on the slave narrative has often reinforced the “resistance” thesis I mentioned earlier. In order to appreciate how this theme has developed and to see how my project fits into the trajectory of other studies of African-American literature, I turn to one of the principal critics of African-American autobiography: William L. Andrews.

In a review essay entitled “African-American Autobiography Criticism: Retrospect and Prospect,” Andrews details pertinent critical moments of the 1960s (recovery and republication of African-American texts, recognizing their value as political, revolutionary documents) and the 1970s (constructing literary histories and

---

<sup>9</sup> See Hardesty, “Directly to the Bible” (53-67); Higginbotham, “Feminist Theology, 1880-1900” (120-149), and Brekus, “Recovering the History of Female Preaching in America” (esp. 6-9).

bibliographies of African-American autobiography, recognizing the importance of autobiographical acts as potentially liberating for the individual writer, and the rise of feminist criticism). Clearly, Andrews recognizes that the surge of critical interest in African-American autobiography during the 1960s and 1970s was rooted in a time of social upheaval by way of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>10</sup> As a result, scholars began looking to past texts to reinforce a certain kind of African-American text, that of resistance and revolution. At the same time the African-American canon was coalescing, the academic community was engaged in the process of accounting for “unprecedented works of black rage and radical political consciousness” (197). In such an environment, it is not surprising that the critical legacy of African-American autobiography is based on adversarial, resistance-oriented (or “trickster”), and perhaps even “masculine” (read: virulent, independent) approaches to slave narratives and other nineteenth-century autobiographies.

Into this politically-charged atmosphere stepped the critics of the 1980s. Andrews characterizes the decade as being dominated by criticism on the antebellum slave narrative, beginning in 1979 with the essays in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (edited by Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto) and Frances Smith Foster’s *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*.<sup>11</sup> He then contextualizes his own work (specifically, his 1986 book *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*) by situating himself

---

<sup>10</sup> In this essay, Andrews also points out that Rebecca Chalmers Barton’s important work, *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography* (1948), was the “first book-length study” in the field of American autobiography and anticipated this literary response to social upheaval, what Andrews calls “an accelerating militancy in modern black autobiography” (195-6). Barton recognized that black authors from 1892-1946 had already produced literary documents equal in intellectual complexity to those of whites, and that white America would need to recognize the equal worth of blacks overall (196).

<sup>11</sup> Also see Sidonie Smith’s earlier groundbreaking study of the slave narrative and other African-American autobiographies, *Where I’m Bound* (1974).

alongside Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Andrews is right to note that both Baker and Gates analyze the discursive struggle for an authentic, particularly *black* voice in American literature, though each uses a different critical framework directed at incorporating black vernacular expression (the fluidity/economics of the blues on one hand and the rhetorical tropes of "Signifyin(g)"/signification on the other). More importantly, however, each of these critics ambitiously attempts to create an overarching, systematic theory of African-American literature that can be applied to various works of that literature, forever changing our view of the canon.

For a detailed example of how this process works, let's examine Andrews's use of "freedom" as a critical method in *To Tell a Free Story*. The very first sentence of the preface declares, "The thesis of this book, simply put, is this: the import of the autobiographies of black people during the first century of the genre's existence in the United States is that they 'tell a free story' as well as talk about freedom as a theme and goal of life" (xi). Overtly, Andrews is referring to freedom from physical enslavement. However, in order to make his case for a larger tradition of African-American autobiography based on the slave narrative, Andrews places spiritual autobiography in the role of precursor: "In the first fifty years of the slave narrative...the slavery of sin received much more condemnation than the sin of slavery" (*Free Story* 44). The part of the tradition that involves spiritual matters and religious language is a bit of a stumbling block for Andrews. He wants to claim spiritual autobiography as an essential part of a larger genre, but he does not hear an "authentic" black voice in the early texts. In fact,

Andrews only lightly touches the “Pauline paradox” that defines spiritual freedom, meaning that the individual must place himself/herself “under the mastery of Christ” in order to be liberated “from the bondage of sin” (*Free Story* 44). The parts of the narratives of Briton Hammon, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and George White that Andrews seems to have an aversion to are those that address pain and suffering in Christian terms, encouraging the believer to have faith in God, who controls everything—even hardships. By allowing the “infinite design of Providence” to rule their narratives, Andrews suggests that the authors of these texts miss the point (*Free Story* 47). In his assessment, the genre of black autobiography could not “begin to distinguish itself as an Afro-American form of discourse” until “black autobiographers started assigning causation and culpability to *men* for the evils *they* brought on their peers” (emphasis in original, *Free Story* 47). For Andrews, black autobiography is most compelling when the autobiographer is able to analyze his/her life in human terms, independent of God. Conversion narratives are only “a kind of slave narrative in spiritual terms” wherein “the hero-liberator is always Christ, never the convert” (*Free Story* 45).

But what would happen if we reverse the equation, analyzing slave narratives as a kind of spiritual autobiography? Can self-effacing, Christ-affirming rhetoric be heroic? What if religious “codependence” is actually a rhetorical position of strength? The model proposed by Andrews for the African-American autobiographical canon is one of linear progression, suggesting that the “Culmination of a Century” (Andrews’s title for Chapter Six of *To Tell a Free Story*) can be found in autobiographies such as Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—a revised and expanded edition of his 1845 *Narrative*—in which Douglass masterfully recasts his life story on his own terms,

putting his own unique stamp on abolition and wresting textual authority away from William Lloyd Garrison (who wrote the preface for the 1845 *Narrative*). A potential problem with this model is that it privileges a methodology of “freedom” that places a high emphasis on self-sufficient, self-conscious individualism as an American (in this case, *African-American*) ideal.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Andrews’s model seems to make resistance to and analysis of an unjust social system (slavery) more important than an attempt by autobiographers to transcend that system by viewing its horrors as potential spiritual trials.<sup>13</sup>

In his introduction to *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, published in the same year as *To Tell a Free Story* (1986), Andrews continues to define spiritual autobiography in relation to the slave narrative through the framework of resistance. However, as he describes the unique role women had to play in (or on the boundaries of) the church, he points to a particular gender-based kind of resistance and self-determination. For example, he says of Jarena Lee’s autobiography that it “offers us the earliest and most detailed information we have about the traditional roles of women in organized black religious life in the United States and about the ways in which *resistance to those roles* began to manifest itself” (my emphasis,

---

<sup>12</sup> Sidonie Smith reminds us in her landmark work *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987) that individualism is a highly gendered concept; women in the West have been handed an autobiographical tradition steeped in what she terms an androcentric “ideology of individualism” that has its roots in the humanism of the early modern period (20). Just as “a realignment of the human subject occurred... in which autobiography as the literary representation of that human potentiality became not only possible but also desirable” (26), human subjectivity was reaffirmed as the special province of male selfhood. In fact, the male speaking subject had to be defined against the silent female: “the new man achieves his definition insofar as woman’s subjectivity and her public voice remain silenced” (31). These binaries of male/female, public/private carry over into nineteenth-century ideologies of domesticity.

<sup>13</sup> Such a model also marginalizes texts that don’t fit into the linear narrative of progress; for example, where does *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote* fit into the progress-oriented canon as a spiritual autobiography focusing on Christian perfection, considering the fact that it was published as late as 1879?

*Sisters of the Spirit 2*). Andrews focuses on the “calling” to preach as the self-authorizing point in these women’s conversion stories (13), a vocation that gave them alternatives to the “four major roles” women would have been expected to fulfill in the nineteenth century: “daughter, wife, mother, and ultimately spiritual sister in the Christian faith” (17). For Andrews, freedom from these roles allowed for the “growth of authentic, individually authorized selfhood” rooted in an “internal ideal” (16-17). By emphasizing the authorial independence of Lee, Elaw, and Foote in terms of *freedom from* male domestic and ecclesiastical authority (husbands, ministers) rather than the *freedom to* focus on a relationship with the divine and lead others to Christ, Andrews politicizes race and gender by making religion a vehicle rather than a destination.

Elizabeth Elkin Grammer also focuses on freedom from domesticity in her book *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003). Grammer employs the “itinerant self” as a critical figure, developing a reading method that addresses women’s roles as itinerant-preachers-turned-autobiographers who were called by God to preach, resulting in a peripatetic life that often separated these women from a dominant culture that urged them to remain at home. However, in spite of Grammer’s investment in a “poetics of itinerancy” and the potential fragmentation of a “rootless life,” she also touches on the notion that “the hope of any autobiographer is to tell a unified story that somehow represents the unified self behind it” (25). As a whole, *Some Wild Visions* contains an underlying but not fully explored tension between the idea of a “unified self” and fragmentary itinerant texts.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The question of fragmentation as a particularly feminine textual characteristic is briefly addressed in a paragraph where Grammer remarks, “Some feminist scholars have popularized the notion that women’s autobiographical writing is necessarily fragmented, discontinuous, repetitive, formless. Living fragmented lives, they say, women have no choice but to write formless autobiography: social experience determines

Reading Grammer together with Andrews, we may find ourselves asking why certain conceptions of autobiography tend to value the “unified” self. For these two critics, some “unity” is achieved by defining the self against something (such as domesticity or slavery), and autobiography becomes a path to autonomy. By focusing on a discourse of freedom for the individual, however, other discourses and ideas about subjectivity are sometimes subordinated. Since Christian commitment implies unity with the divine and/or with a Christian community rather than unity within the self, perhaps we need additional critical models to analyze spiritual texts and religious language.

In fact, autotheographies of the nineteenth century teach us to look for a different kind of unity, one that comes from conversion and redemption. As Julia A. J. Foote tells us in her account of her conversion at age fifteen, she is able to rejoice in the assurance of her salvation when she flips through the Bible and her eyes alight on the words of Isaiah 43.1-2, part of which reads: “ ‘I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine’ ” (qtd. in Foote: 180). Foote presents her subjectivity as swallowed up in the Lord’s being. By grace, she is a child of God, “joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8.17), and even a joint author with him; as the beginning of her preface to *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote* states, “I have written this little book after many prayers to ascertain the will of God—having long had an impression to do it. I have a consciousness of obedience to the will of my dear Lord and Master” (163). Foote’s authorial identity is authorized by God, not herself.

Yet individual conversion experiences like Foote’s are not only personal events, particularly in a published autobiography. Rather, it is important to remember that, as

---

literary expression” (119). Grammer appears unwilling to simplistically concede “formlessness,” however; she seemingly wants to retain both the creative potential and potential drawbacks of fragmentation, repetition, and “serial form” in the autobiographies she discusses (120-121).



Gauri Viswanathan reiterates again and again in *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (1998), conversion always takes place in a historical moment and a social context. The writing and publication of religious experience cannot be separated from cultural and institutional parameters. Viswanathan's work is particularly illuminating for my project, as she undertakes a fascinating reading of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) at one moment in her book. In Viswanathan's view, James relies on the trope of "turning" in the experience of conversion in order to emphasize the "transformation from lower to higher mental states—from dullness to vibrancy, division to wholeness, delusion to enlightenment, and perhaps the most celebratory of all movements, from imprisonment to freedom" (84). As Viswanathan suggests, however, such idealistic "self-reconstruction" tends to remove the believer from historical (not to mention literary) context, and, in my view, also limits the textual authenticity of rapturous union with the divine as experienced by the believer and communicated for the purposes of converting others. In her reading of James, Viswanathan exposes a Western tendency to unproblematically assign a "democratic, emancipatory critique of the self" to the process of conversion, making it "the central, self-authenticating moment in cultural development" (84-85). Instead, Viswanathan argues that conversion is always a complex "interpretive act" (4). Therefore, conversion should not necessarily be read as a mode of dissent (what Andrews might call "resistance") or of blind assimilation and conformity. Each conversion (or spiritual narrative describing conversion) presents an opportunity for traditional models of conversion to be reinterpreted and for the recasting of theologies.

By bringing the conversion process and religious language to the fore while

arguing for a more critical approach to “self-authorization” as the grounds for literary subjectivity, I am not suggesting that we should pay less attention to the multiple identity categories of the believer-subject (black/white, male/female, enslaved/free, Methodist or Shaker, etc.) or that the believer-subject is not involved in a conscious construction of the “self” in her autobiographical writings. On the contrary, this dissertation examines race and gender in the spiritual writings of African-American women as issues that make the Christian faith walk more immediate, urgent, and necessary in their lives and theologies.<sup>15</sup> Like other critics before me who have provided new ways of looking at African-American women’s texts, I want to influence the tone of the conversation on spiritual autobiography, and therefore, perhaps, the conversation itself.<sup>16</sup>

In this endeavor, I am indebted to the groundbreaking work of Andrews and other critics who have given us a way to think comprehensively about a large body of African-American texts. I also build on more recent literary scholarship on nineteenth-century black women’s spiritual narratives, as critics like Katherine Clay Bassard, Elizabeth Elkin Grammer, Richard Douglass-Chin, and Yolanda Pierce are paying closer attention to the biblical nuances and high level of theological engagement in these narratives.<sup>17</sup> In

---

<sup>15</sup> For more on the meaning of the Christian “walk of faith” for women in the nineteenth-century, see Hobbs (38-46).

<sup>16</sup> Xiomara Santamarina’s book *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood* (2005) is a great example of this kind of paradigm-shifting criticism on black women’s autobiographies in the nineteenth century. Santamarina illuminates the ways in which Sojourner Truth, Harriet Wilson, Eliza Potter, and Elizabeth Keckley “autobiographically reformulated their agency along the lines of their labor, emphasizing the dignity of their work in *all* its aspects, even as they recognized the constraints and inequalities structuring their work practices” (8). By analyzing race and gender difference ergonomically, Santamarina complicates the critical discourse around racial uplift, making it difficult to read other texts of the period without considering the historical, cultural, ideological, and literary implications of black working womanhood.

<sup>17</sup> I also look to important studies like Susie Stanley’s *Holy Boldness: Women Preachers’ Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self* (2002). A self-proclaimed “church historian and theologian whose training and research interests include gender studies,” Stanley does not approach the “Wesleyan/Holiness women’s narratives” in her study from a literary critic’s perspective, but her analysis of the “sanctified self” in a large cross-section of American holiness narratives by both white and black women published between the

particular, my project takes up the call that Joycelyn Moody gives at the end of *Sentimental Confessions* (2001), a call for literary critics to take theology seriously: “Reading for theological rather than—or as well as—political, social, literary, or cultural significance requires attention to what early black holy women writers assert and instruct about who and how ‘God’ is and about the kinds of relationships humans (should) have with the divine” (176). Like Moody, I recognize that participation in theological systems is often gendered—women must defend their “calling” to preach and/or write, interpreting scripture and making theological claims rather than simply exhorting or testifying—but that to read their theologies as vehicles for empowerment alone overlooks the central purpose of many of these texts: to convert others and testify to the importance of holiness as a life-transforming doctrine.<sup>18</sup> It is not enough to praise the self-confidence and self-assertiveness these spiritual writings exude because their female authors became religious and social leaders in the face of opposition from family, friends, the clergy, and even (initially) themselves. We must also recognize the ways in which these women became theologians who participated in the textual institution of the Bible and the doctrinal institutions of denominations—even when not officially welcomed.

We also need to problematize the word “theologian” when discussing black women’s spiritual writings in the nineteenth century. For example, Moody emphasizes how crucial it is to think about these women as theology-producers: “If theology denotes the analysis, application, or presentation of traditional doctrines of a religion or religious

---

1840s and 1970s is invaluable in terms of understanding the theological threads holiness women were weaving in their texts (xi, xxxi). Stanley also discusses the literary style and motivations behind women’s holiness narratives in her final chapter (195-211).

<sup>18</sup> Moody makes a similar point: “To read African American holy women’s writings without regard for their religious content is to misread them, even to distort them in search of significance—political, social, and cultural significance—that is actually ancillary to their theology and certainly inseparable from it” (20).

group, then [black women writers of spiritual narratives] unquestionably produced theology” (17). As Moody describes it, theology is a process that involves more than abstract thinking about the character of the divine, the authority of scripture, or even detailed biblical interpretation. Indeed, in the hands of these women, theology “combines the practical with the transcendent” (Moody 18). Through their autobiographical writings, black women in the nineteenth century used their personal life stories as fodder for practical and mystical Christ-centered theologies.

\* \* \*

Each of the following chapters addresses a central aspect of autotheography: the development of a sacrosanct relationship between the author/believer and the divine as modeled for the reader, a relationship that is not specific to only one denomination. Indeed, forms of Christian perfection transcend Methodism (Foote and Elaw), Shakerism (Jackson), and Unitarianism (Harper). Whether expressed through sanctification, celibacy, a call to leadership and social reform, or an ecumenical vision for the church, the rubric of holiness provides an opportunity to productively compare different kinds of related religious language—including biblical fragments, pieces of hymns, poetry, and spiritual visions/vignettes—as shorthand models for the relationships between God and the believer and between the believer (author) and believers-to-be (readers).

By addressing the rhetorical strategies within these complex spiritual texts, I examine multiple ways in which theological systems were crucial to the worldviews of these women. While highlighting specific insights about God, the nature of belief, and the importance of certain doctrines, each of these texts assumes a readership with a high degree of biblical literacy. When the speaker drops in a biblical allusion, citation, or turn

of phrase, the reader would have been expected to know the context of the surrounding Bible verses or hymn stanzas from which it came. My goal is to provide some of that context, showing parallels and possibilities from the interpretive frameworks and textual juxtapositions provided by these women. For instance, it is important to provide links between autobiographical spiritual narratives and the fragments of hymns that are frequently quoted within them. Depending on their themes and iconography, pieces and even the full texts of hymns become interventions in an autobiographer's larger theological points. In addition, some narratives feature poetry or hymns by the author herself, such as the hymn on "How to Obtain Sanctification" at the end of Julia A. J. Foote's *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*. Read alongside devotional and religious-themed poetry by Frances E. W. Harper, poems like Foote's help the modern reader to understand the participatory, didactic, ritualized nature of versification during the nineteenth century, characterized by "sentimentality, imagination...musicality, and colloquialism" as well as "Christian piety and morality" (Sherman xx). Both hymns and poetry could be powerfully persuasive modes of conversion.

Chapter Two, "'Now Is the Day of Salvation': Sanctification as Method and Metaphor in Julia A. J. Foote's *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*," argues that, in Foote's text, the Methodist doctrine of sanctification is a metaphoric system that also has the potential to overturn social injustice. According to her autobiographical sketch, Foote began traveling the road that would eventually lead to a career preaching holiness when she experienced "a second, distinct work of the Holy Ghost" and obtained sanctification (192). Although only a teenager at the time of the experience, Foote explains that she recognized the significance of Romans 6.6 ("Knowing this, that our old man is crucified

with [Christ], that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin”): her old self passed away, “and perfect love took possession” (187). Foote narrates her autotheography from the perspective of her sanctified self, using the biblical metaphor of a “brand plucked from the burning” numerous times across her text in order to demonstrate God’s continuous intervention in her life and to urge her readers to strive for entire sanctification.<sup>19</sup>

Both Foote and Jackson narrate the importance of holy living, but Jackson feels called to celibacy as a higher level of sanctification, or “full holiness.” She accepts this call when she experiences sanctification and simultaneously sees a vision of original sin, through which she realizes that abstaining from sexual relations is essential for holiness. While Foote was able to preach in Methodist circles throughout her career, Jackson’s unique perspective on sanctification led her to a Christology of abstinence and to embrace Shaker theology. In her autotheographical writings, Jackson uses her eye of faith—her “spirit eye”—to perceive God’s will for her life, but as she explains, her visionary experiences put her at odds with her husband and the rest of the Methodist community around her. Chapter Three, “‘Aleaving the World, the Flesh, and the Devil’: Holiness, Celibacy, and Separation from ‘the World’ in Rebecca Cox Jackson’s Autobiographical Writings,” explains why Jackson’s theology of celibacy made it impossible for her to remain in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and analyzes how her orientation toward and deployment of the expression “the world” shifts across her text. Though she lived with the Shakers at Watervliet, New York, for a time, Jackson presents herself as unable to completely leave “the world” behind, since that world contained other African-Americans in need of spiritual help—especially other black

---

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of the “sanctified self,” see Stanley’s *Holy Boldness*.

women.

Chapter Four, “Frances E. W. Harper’s Poetic Vocation: Unitarian Theology and Archetypes of Leadership in *Moses: A Story of the Nile* and Other Selected Poems on Slavery, Temperance, and Spirituality,” focuses on the autotheographical process that takes place in Harper’s devotional poetry (lyric poetry containing an “I” speaker in a style reminiscent of spiritual autobiography). This kind of religious poetry often includes retellings of Bible stories within the context of both the individual’s encounter with the divine (“private”) and her relationship with society and its issues (“public”). Harper’s poems dramatize this private/public contrast well, since she requires us to take seriously the religious experiences and spiritual longings of autobiographical “I” voices. Although she did not produce a published autobiography (Carla Peterson 122) and left behind no journals (Foster, *Brighter* 22), it is possible to read Harper’s poetry, essays, and fiction so as to understand some of her personal goals and motivations. Harper accepted her literary calling when she first began publishing her poems as a young woman, and she showed the content of her message through the subjects she addressed in her poetry and in her lectures, including such wide-ranging issues as temperance, rights for women, education, suffrage, Christian devotion, and the abolition of slavery. While she does not present complex doctrinal systems like Foote, Elaw, and Jackson, Harper nevertheless impresses upon her readers the importance of holy living. Her “I”-voiced poetry allows for a kind of practical narrative theology, a clear-cut guide to salvation from what Harper called the “twin evils of slavery and intemperance” (*Brighter* 281). Her poems were meant to inspire others—her fellow African-Americans in particular—to take up positions of spiritual and political leadership, just as the biblical Moses did when he aligned his

fortunes with his people. It is significant that Harper was a member of the Unitarian Church; as exemplified in her poetry, her theological premises are clearly Unitarian, including a belief in the simplicity and transparency of the Bible, an understanding of sin as dangerous and predictable, and an emphasis on (both masculine and feminine) leadership models that could inspire holy living, combat sin, and lead to a better society.

As Chapters 2, 3, and 4 demonstrate, Foote, Jackson, and Harper each chose a particular denomination or sect as the foundation for their messages of holiness and social change. Chapter Five, “‘I Enjoyed Richly the Spirit of Adoption’: Experiential ‘Adoption’ Theology in Zilpha Elaw’s *Memoirs*,” explains that, although she was a Methodist who believed in the importance of sanctification as crucial to the believer’s relationship with the Holy Spirit, Elaw preaches a Pauline-based gospel of “adoption” in her *Memoirs* that reveals a more ecumenical vision of the church than that espoused by the other women in this study. From the outset, Elaw performs rhetorical acts of submission to the Holy Spirit, incorporates various Bible verses and hymn stanzas into her text, and attempts to explain the meaning of her religious calling, extrasensory experiences, and itinerancy. She also models critical reading practices, encouraging her readers to “carefully read, study, and digest [the Holy Scriptures], especially the title-deeds of the Christian covenant” (such as Paul’s writings) and reminding them that waywardness and disobedience to God can cloud the “mental vision” of the believer, causing him/her to “fail of reading the Lord’s indications” (52, 102-103). Thus, Elaw’s *Memoirs* constitute a quintessential example of autotheography as both a subgenre of spiritual autobiography and a theological process of meaning-making, weaving together multiple sources to present a unique portrait of the “regenerated” subject—a portrait



drawn simultaneously by the Holy Spirit and the writer/believer. Announcing herself as an adopted child of God, Elaw gives her readers the information necessary to also become children of God through grace in the “spirit of adoption,” claiming a spiritual “inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (52).<sup>20</sup>

By establishing connections between spiritual writings by black women across genres (autobiography, poetry, and hymnody), time periods (antebellum, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction), and approaches to religious language (theological, prophetic, mystical, devotional, metaphoric, poetic, etc.), this dissertation analyzes the complex arguments these women are making about the nature and importance of holiness, both in their own narratives and for the reader as a prospective instrument in God’s hands.

---

<sup>20</sup> See Acts 20.32 for the biblical source of Elaw’s language.

## Works Cited

- Andrews, William L. "African-American Autobiography Criticism: Retrospect and Prospect." *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991. 195-215. Print.
- . Introduction. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 1-22. Print.
- . *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986. Print.
- Baker, Jr., Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. Print.
- Barton, Rebecca Chalmers. *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography*. New York: Harper, 1948. Print.
- Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999. Print.
- Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989. Print.
- Brekus, Catherine A. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998. Print.
- Bruss, Elizabeth W. *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.
- Bunyan, John. *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Ed. W. R. Owens. New York: Penguin, 1987. Print.
- Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.
- Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. Westport: Greenwood, 1980. Print.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye. *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Douglass-Chin, Richard J. *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001. Print.

- Elaw, Zilpha. *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]*. 1846. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 49-160. Print.
- Fisher, Dexter, and Robert B. Stepto, eds. *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1979. Print.
- Foote, Julia A. J. *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*. 1879. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 161-234. Print.
- Foster, Frances Smith. Introduction. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. New York: Feminist, 1990. 3-40. Print.
- . *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. "My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women." *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988. 63-89. Print.
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- Grammer, Elizabeth Elkin. *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Itinerant Female Preachers in 19th-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Hardesty, Nancy A. *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*. 1984. 2nd ed. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1999. Print.
- Harper, Frances E. W. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. New York: Feminist, 1990. Print.
- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998. 343-351. Print.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.

- Hobbs, June Hadden. *"I Sing for I Cannot Be Silent": The Feminization of American Hymnody, 1870-1920*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997. Print.
- The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1972. Print.
- Humez, Jean McMahon, ed. Introduction. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1981. 1-64. Print.
- Jackson, Rebecca Cox. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*. Ed. Jean McMahon Humez. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1981. Print.
- Jones, Martha S. *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)." *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. 119-137. Print.
- McKay, Nellie Y. "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998. 96-107. Print.
- Moody, Joycelyn. *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001. Print.
- Peterson, Carla L. *"Doers of the Word": African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.
- Peterson, Linda H. "Gender and Autobiographical Form: The Case of the Spiritual Autobiography." *Studies in Autobiography*. Ed. James Olney. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 211-222. Print.
- Pierce, Yolanda. *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2005. Print.
- Santamarina, Xiomara. *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005. Print.
- Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (1991): 773-797. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 April 2009.
- Shea, Daniel B. *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988. Print.

- Sherman, Joan R. *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1974. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie. *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. Print.
- . *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*. Westport: Greenwood, 1974. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. Print.
- Stanley, Susie C. *Holy Boldness: Women Preachers' Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2002. Print.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.
- Walters, Alexander. *My Life and Work*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1917.  
*Documenting the American South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1999. Web.  
23 July 2010.
- Waters, Kristin, and Carol B. Conaway, eds. *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*. Burlington: U of Vermont P, 2007. Print.

## CHAPTER 2

### “Now Is the Day of Salvation”: Sanctification as Method and Metaphor in Julia A. J. Foote’s *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*

*If the language of Methodism supplied a vocabulary and a grammatical structure that allowed women to articulate their religious experience without alienating men, the same was true of their pursuit of sanctification, which brought with it the possibility of a dramatic subversion of traditional hierarchies at least within the Methodist spiritual economy. For sanctification was no respecter of conventional boundaries.*

–David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (140)

Julia A. J. Foote was about 56 years old in 1879 when she drew on her own financial resources to publish the first edition of her spiritual autobiography, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*.<sup>1</sup> By that time the heyday of the slave narrative had already passed; fugitive slave narrators were no longer needed to testify to the horrors of slavery and further the abolitionist cause. Yet Foote begins her autobiography by invoking slavery’s dreadfulness, employing two stock figures in the tradition of the slave narrative: the slave woman who refuses the sexual advances of her cruel master and is whipped for her trouble, and the enslaved man who labors under terrible conditions but ultimately purchases his own freedom and his

---

<sup>1</sup>According to William L. Andrews’s “textual note” that precedes *Sisters of the Spirit*, “Julia A. J. Foote financed the publication of two editions of *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, the first in 1879 and a reprint in 1886, both printed in Cleveland” (23). Also see bibliographical references in Charles Edwin Jones’s *Black Holiness: A Guide to the Study of Black Participation in Wesleyan Perfectionist and Glossolalic Pentecostal Movements* (252).

family's freedom. In Foote's narrative, these two individuals are not just archetypal "figures," however. The slave woman's experience is her mother's, and the enslaved man is her father. Foote may have been born free in Schenectady, New York, in 1823, yet the legacy of slavery is still with her: she firmly positions herself as the daughter of slaves (Foote 166).<sup>2</sup>

Foote is not unique among nineteenth-century black writers in her impulse to construct her narrative identity in terms of slavery. By anchoring her narrative in her parents' enslaved past and thereby providing a back-story for her own life and authorship, Foote creates the conditions for her credibility as a black writer. As William Andrews argues, she "feign[s] authenticity [for rhetorical purposes] in and through a carefully cultivated voice" ("Novelization of Voice" 24). Rather than hide the connection between spiritual autobiography and the slave narrative, Foote deliberately exposes the rivet that holds these genres together: the metaphoric and thematic concept of freedom. In his landmark study, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, Andrews asserts that "both the fugitive slave narrator and the black spiritual autobiographer trace their freedom back to an awakening of their awareness of their fundamental identity with and rightful participation in *logos*, whether understood as reason and its expression in speech or as divine spirit" (7). In this way, the linked genres of the slave narrative and spiritual autobiography become "gospels of freedom" (7). Indeed, as Nellie McKay explains, "for spiritual autobiographers, the escape from sinfulness and ignorance of a worthwhile self and the achievement of salvation and knowledge of God's saving grace bestowed a fundamentally positive

---

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical references to Foote throughout this chapter refer to page numbers from Foote's autobiography, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*, reprinted in *Sisters of the Spirit* (edited by William L. Andrews).

identity” (180). It is this production of identity through God’s grace that we must focus on if we are to understand the process of conversion in African-American spiritual autobiographies.

Although many nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographers narrated their experiences of grace, Foote is unique among her contemporaries in the degree to which she is concerned with interpreting the Bible through a *systematic* theology of grace—in this case, a unified way of looking at the Bible that reconciles the Old and New Testaments through the theological concept of sanctification. She sets up a complex theological system that brings together disparate figures, images and ideas from the Old Testament (such as Joshua) with those of the New Testament (including Jesus). Foote’s understanding of covenant theology—in the Old Testament, the special relationship with the Hebrew people first established by Yahweh/God through Abraham, and in the New Testament, the continuation of that covenant relationship between God and humankind through the sacrifice of God’s son, Jesus Christ—allows her to extend God’s covenant to her readers and invite them to experience sanctification, a state that allowed the Christian believer to feel “the full joys of salvation” (Foote 192).

Also termed “Christian perfection,” sanctification is a “second, distinct work of the Holy Ghost” that a believer experiences after justification, the initial encounter with God during which an individual is “converted” to believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross to atone for his/her sins and the sins of all humankind (Foote 192). Through justification, the believer is redeemed from sin and its deadly consequences (hellfire and eternal damnation) and can look forward to everlasting life with God in heaven. Through sanctification, however, God performs a second work of grace on the believer, allowing



him/her to live a holy life on earth that is free from sin. The sanctified believer is able to resist temptation and conquer the sinful nature through Christ's continuous intervention and assurance, leading a "perfect" and exemplary life on earth, "no longer...enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6.6, NRSV).<sup>3</sup>

Foote involves her readers in the process of sanctification by using the figure of a "brand plucked from the fire" throughout her book, creating a dense textual matrix involving her theological assertions, the events of her own life, and potential applications of her life experience for the reader. The image of this "brand" takes on additional significance when we consider that Foote was born in Schenectady, New York, in 1823 and grew up in a region that had experienced one religious revival after another, so much so that western New York was often referred to as the "burned-over district." As Whitney Cross points out in his foundational book, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*, the phrase the "burned-over district" was popularized by the evangelist/educator/theologian/author Charles Grandison Finney. It makes forest fires analogous to spiritual fire, both of which can leave paths of destruction in their wake as the flames lick up everything that is combustible (3). The metaphor of fire also "suggests that the burning-over process [fertilizes] luxuriant new growths rather than merely destroying old ones" (4). In effect, spiritual burning can be a cleansing, renewing fire. The implications for Foote's use of fire as a metaphor are tantalizing, as she becomes a "brand plucked from the fire" of the

---

<sup>3</sup> This biblical citation is taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 3rd ed. (edited by Coogan). Foote herself references Romans 6.6 in her description of her own sanctification experience, when "perfect love took possession" of her (187). For more details on the Wesleyan (Methodist) concept of sanctification, a brief history of how holiness doctrine spread in America, and more on the "sanctified self" in spiritual autobiographies, see Susie Stanley, *Holy Boldness* (1-5, 68-99).

burned-over district who calls for the Holy Spirit to bring a "baptism of fire" to cleanse the church of any pastors whose "lips speak vanity" and do not teach parishioners the "true knowledge of salvation" through the doctrine of sanctification (Foote 231). It is important to note here that the figure of the "brand" works in two ways: first, the brand itself is saved from the flames of sin and death (or hellfire), and second, the brand that is plucked from the fire has the potential to brand others with salvation, leaving a lasting imprint on their lives. Through her text, Foote herself becomes a spiritual brand, an agent of God's mark on others.

Foote follows in the footsteps of Methodism's most important founder, John Wesley, by referring to herself as a spiritual "brand." As a young boy in 1709, Wesley narrowly escaped death in a fire that burned his family's house to the ground. His deliverance from the flames became a "part of Methodist folklore, the proof that [he] had from the start been chosen to lead the Christian revival"; as a "brand plucked from the burning," he would "offer others salvation from even fiercer flames" (Hattersley 26-27). Similarly, Foote becomes a "brand" leading others to salvation after being saved herself at numerous moments in her text (wherein the "brand" is the central symbol anchoring her spiritual chronology).

Becoming a "brand plucked from the fire" to spiritually brand others, Foote may also be taking a torturous object from the harsh realities of slavery and turning it into a positive figure for salvation.<sup>4</sup> If so, she draws on one of the key aspects of slave theology:

---

<sup>4</sup> Branding was one of the many ways in which a slave owner could place an indelible mark upon the bodies of his/her slaves. Other activities that left a permanent mark included difficult and hazardous work activities that could result in broken or mangled limbs, fingers, and so on, as well as other forms of punishment, including whipping (White and White 48). Branding was a particularly cruel form of power that "resulted directly from... ownership," as it would forever remind the slave that his body was not his own. Particularly during the eighteenth century, it was commonplace for "owners' names or initials [to be] seared into black flesh by the branding iron." Slaves could also be punished for running away by being

while “whites viewed slaves like other livestock” that could be branded and sold, many slaves believed that they were “God’s possessions” rather than any earthly master’s and were therefore heirs to God’s kingdom (Hopkins 9, 13). Although not a slave herself, Foote uses the metaphor of the “brand” in a manner similar to the ways in which slaves employed “symbols and metaphors...to express their reality,” rhetorically freeing themselves “from both the religious and theological language of their masters” (Coleman 48). Foote’s appropriation of the biblical phrase “a brand plucked from the fire” becomes a symbolic language that potentially spans spiritual and material realities.

Considering the symbolic possibilities of the “brand,” it is not surprising that Foote uses a spiritual narrative economy throughout her “autobiographical sketch.” Her choice of the word “sketch” to describe this work is telling; within the title itself, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*, Foote prepares her readers for a specialized approach to her life and theology. In short, she will present a rough outline of the events in her life in the service of certain spiritual doctrines that she deems most important, without trying the reader's patience with too much specificity or development. As a result, the details she does select take on heightened significance. Just as Foote recommends a kind of close-reading approach when analyzing the impact of each and every word of Christ (“Behind every word of Jesus is a doctrine—a meaning deep and high,” as stated in her sermon on “Christian Perfection,” 67), we can adopt a similar textual method in approaching Foote’s work; entire doctrines can be found in short phrases, juxtaposed quotations, repeated symbolism, and so on. Indeed, Foote weaves diverse texts (personal testimony, scripture, hymns, and sermons) and

---

branded as troublemakers; such brands would make fugitive slaves more readily identifiable, as runaway slave advertisements often demonstrated (White and White 48-49).

rhetorical approaches into her writing, forcing her readers to become more attuned to connections across modes of spiritual language.

With the intention of emphasizing these textual strategies, I will use the term *auto/theo/graphy* (self/God/writing) throughout this chapter to refer to Foote's autobiographical text. As explained in my introduction, this term puts *theos*—indicating both “God” and theology production—at the center of inquiry, underscoring Foote's meditations on her relationship with the divine, her intense belief in God's grace and attendant focus on the material and spiritual consequences of sanctification in her own life, and her use of the “brand” as a powerful metaphor facilitating her narration and allowing her to call her readers to sanctification.

Foote's title also contains a kind of rhetorical posturing that allows her to highlight the parts of her life that she can relate more directly to her spiritual journey, those pieces that can become object lessons for the reader. As her epigraph reveals, the image referenced by her title, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, is taken from Zechariah 3.2: "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" (Foote 161). I will situate this verse more concretely later on in this chapter as the central theological metaphor of her autotheography; here, it is important to note that Foote repeats the phraseology of Zechariah 3.2 seven times, at various instances: when her "life was spared" after having accidentally ingested a large quantity of liquor at the age of five (168); after God seemingly condemned her dancing by covering her with a "smothering sensation" each time she tried a few steps (178); upon her conversion at the age of fifteen (181); during her sanctification, when "a weight of glory" came on her and she had "full assurance of it" (186-187); "[rejoicing] in persecution" after the pastor of her church visited her to

reprimand her for trying to "read and dictate" to her elders on the glories of sanctification (188-189); having been tempted to worry about her converted-but-not-yet-sanctified husband after he departed for Boston, but eventually surrendering herself and "all [her] interests into the hands of God" (190-191); and using "brand plucked from the burning" as a catch-all phrase that could characterize each of the various places where she "was used of God to his glory in saving precious souls" (218). Taken together, these moments of branding become a shorthand chronology of her spiritual development, from temperance to conversion to sanctification to marriage and ministry. Phrases such as "I was like a 'brand plucked from the burning'" (168) and "Was I not indeed a brand plucked from the burning?" (181) become touchstones across Foote's text in lieu of a more traditional timeline. Because she tends to allude only to specific hymns or Bible verses to orient her readers in the text (rather than consistent references to her age, the year, and/or her geographic location), it is more difficult to trace the "social" timeline of her life (including traditional milestones such as birth, schooling, marriage, and death) than it is to trace the "spiritual" one.

In order to more fully understand how spiritual discourse shapes Foote's text, we must first have a brief overview of certain aspects of her "social" biography. As previously mentioned, Foote was born to former slaves in New York state in 1823. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Foote had difficulty obtaining a formal education. Since blacks were prohibited from attending public schools in Schenectady, she instead attended a "country school" outside Schenectady for two years (from the ages of 10-12) while she was a servant to a white family by the name of Prime (Foote 171). As a young adolescent, Foote stayed home to "do the work, and attend the younger children

while [her mother] went out to days' work" (177). After her family moved to Albany, New York, Foote experienced conversion at the age of fifteen, and she prayed for (and obtained) sanctification through a process that began not long thereafter (180, 187). She subsequently married a sailor named George Foote when she was eighteen, moving to Boston with him. At this time, Foote began to feel the call to preach on the doctrine of sanctification, but her husband opposed her call, threatening to "send [her] back home or to the crazy-house" (196). Feeling the importance of God's commission, Foote did not heed her husband's threats and continued to pursue her preaching career. Though she went on to preach from numerous pulpits across New England, parts of the Midwest, and on the West Coast, Foote initially experienced a certain amount of opposition from the (male) church hierarchy, particularly from Jehiel C. Beman in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church and more generally through a "General Conference of the A.M.E. Church" where a motion "to allow all the women preachers to become members of the conferences" was quashed, barring women like herself from being authorized and licensed to preach (Foote 216).

Other noteworthy events mentioned by Foote in her narrative include the deaths of her father, mother, and husband, but Foote does not spend a great deal of time describing the circumstances of their deaths or her emotional responses to them. In fact, the physical and emotional action of her narrative seems to stop in the mid-1850s, coinciding with a move to Cleveland, Ohio. According to her text, she experienced some kind of "throat difficulty" that kept her from continuing her evangelism for some time, but after the "blood of Jesus" was "applied to [her] throat," she recovered her ability to speak (Foote 224, 228). Andrews suggests that Foote then "returned to preaching in the

state of Ohio as part of a more general Holiness revival that swept the Midwest in the early 1870s” (*Sisters of the Spirit* 10). From the mid 1880s until her death, Foote apparently preached alongside Alexander Walters, a minister who was “elected bishop in 1892 at thirty-four years of age” and who was a strong supporter of women in ministry (Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* 99).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Foote seems to have been quite busy in the last twenty-five years of her life: she published her autobiography (1879), continued preaching, and was ordained a deacon and an elder in the AME Zion Church (the first female deacon and the second female elder in that denomination). She also published a sermon entitled “Christian Perfection” in the *Star of Zion*, a weekly organ of the AME Zion Church, before her death in 1900.<sup>6</sup>

If we compare the litany of events in Foote's life with the symbolic chronology she generates through direct references to Zechariah 3.2, it becomes clear that Foote's "sketches" are rather episodic, sometimes creating a disconnect between the physical and the spiritual. In *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America*, Elizabeth Elkin Grammer addresses the episodic nature of Foote's text by asserting that quantification itself becomes a kind of narrative strategy for Foote as she "[compiles] her itineraries" in an additive manner (61). For instance, in the

---

<sup>5</sup> Collier-Thomas notes, “As a young minister, Walters was tutored by Rev. Julia Foote, who shared some of her earlier experiences with him. Walters was extremely fond of Foote and thought of her as a second mother” (*Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* 100). Walters mentions Foote in his 1917 autobiography, *My Life and Work*, explaining that Foote came to live with his family during the three-year period when he was the pastor of a church in San Francisco, California:

Mrs. Julia Foote, the noted evangelist, rendered me most valuable services while on the coast; indeed, from 1884 until the year she died, 1901, she made my house her home. All the members of my family were greatly indebted to this godly woman for her gracious influence in the home. She was a great preacher, an uncompromising advocate of holiness, and who practiced the gospel she preached. (46)

Based on this statement, Foote lived and worked with Walters in the last two decades of her life, traveling and/or moving with Walters and his family.

<sup>6</sup> See Collier-Thomas (*Daughters of Thunder* 62; *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* 23, 93-94), Martha Jones (186, 190), and Andrews (*Sisters of the Spirit* 10).

chapter "Work in Various Places," Foote "lists her preaching engagements with little or no accompanying detail" (Grammer 61). In effect, Foote seems to think that the scope of her travels and their potential successes (which can be measured in the number of lives touched, or souls converted) is more important than elaborating on her preaching career. Each reference to a specific date or location serves to attest to the fact that "many were converted, and, now and then, one would step into the fountain of cleansing" (Foote 219). Foote relies on metaphoric, sanctification-inflected imagery (here, the cleansing fount; elsewhere, a "brand plucked from the fire" or the cleansing blood of Christ) to "sketch" important events.

Read alongside other spiritual autobiographies by female itinerant preachers such as Zilpha Elaw and Jarena Lee, Foote's text causes Grammer to question the sometimes fragmentary or quantifying tendencies of women's autobiographies overall: "Some feminist scholars have popularized the notion that women's autobiographical writing is necessarily fragmented, discontinuous, repetitive, formless. Living fragmented lives, they say, women have no choice but to write formless autobiography: social experience determines literary expression" (119).<sup>7</sup> Grammer is not entirely convinced by this argument, however; she has problems with the notion that art has to imitate life (an "itinerant" form stemming from the lifestyle of itinerant preaching), and she even suggests that female autobiographers may not have thought of their books as "formless" (121).

---

<sup>7</sup> In essence, Grammer is referencing an argument first articulated by Estelle C. Jelinek in her introduction to an early anthology in the field of gender and autobiography entitled *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980). Jelinek deliberately traced differences between autobiographies by men and women, taking into consideration the private sphere as a space traditionally occupied by women that structurally and thematically shaped their writing—leading to an emphasis on "personal and domestic details" and intimate relationships rather than heroic, public-oriented ideas about the self (Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory* 9).



I would like to take up this issue of “formlessness” to claim that the gendered readings Grammer generalizes can actually undermine the intentionality of fragmentary or repetitive textual strategies. For Foote, incorporating biblical fragments, pieces of hymns, and spiritual vignettes becomes a shorthand way of referencing and reinforcing relationships between God and the sanctified believer (i.e., God and Foote) and between the believer and believers-to-be (i.e., Foote and her readers). The rest of this chapter will be devoted to tracing Foote's metaphoric, episodic approach to her life and conversion, with special emphasis on the biblical typology and verb progressions she employs to explore the nature of sanctification in both the Old and New Testaments. By examining Foote's theology in relation to her life experience, we will see that the opposition she faced from her husband and an all-male clergy when she accepted her calling to preach actually gave her the tools to construct a climate of accessibility and inclusiveness in her text, one rooted in a particularly communal, Methodist ethos. The doctrine of sanctification becomes both a textual method and a liberating metaphoric system, a “vocabulary” and “grammatical structure” with the potential to overcome hierarchies of gender and race as believers claim identity in Christ's gospel of social justice (Hempton 140). In Foote's autotheography, sanctification theology has both radical implications and practical import.

### **Fruits of Slavery vs. Fruit of the Spirit**

From the very beginning when she bridges the genres of spiritual autobiography and the slave narrative, Foote sets up a spiritual approach to the practical problems of

racism. Through this spiritual approach, Foote quickly breaks away from the conventions of the slave narrative in favor of the radical, hierarchy-upending potential of holiness, and we as critics should follow her lead. Although the first four paragraphs of *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* may seem reminiscent of the slave narrative, Foote does not sustain those conventions. Instead, she quickly moves from her parents' experiences of slavery to their lives as free churchgoing blacks. Foote tells the story of her mother's experience of racial discrimination at the communion table in the Methodist Episcopal church. Thinking that all the whites at the service had already taken communion, Foote's mother and another black woman stepped up to the communion table, only to be chastised by a white "mother in Israel" for accidentally approaching the table before all the whites—in this instance, "two of the poorer class of white folks"—had been served (167).<sup>8</sup> According to Foote, such encounters between blacks and their white, so-called Christian neighbors are the "fruits of slavery" (167). By implication, Foote contrasts the "fruits of slavery" with the biblical "fruit of the Spirit"—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5.22-23a). She asks, "Were [the white church members] led by the Holy Spirit? Who shall say? The Spirit of Truth can never be mistaken, nor can he inspire anything unholy" (167). Foote's brilliant rhetorical move allows her to resist the racism of whites by implying that such actions can never be Spirit-filled. Indeed, Foote seems to draw on a key distinction made

---

<sup>8</sup> This negative communion experience sounds a great deal like the incident that led to the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal church: in 1787, "Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and other black worshipers withdrew from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia after being pulled from their knees during worship in a gallery they did not know was closed to black Christians" (Lincoln and Mamiya 50-51). Numerous incidents like this took place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in New England, causing black churchgoers to request separate facilities in which to hold worship services and effectively form new congregations (or denominational branches) independent of their white counterparts (James 139). For more on Allen's life and work, see Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (2008). Also see Allen's autobiography, *The Life, Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (1833).

by the apostle Paul in Galatians when she refers to the communion incident as “one of the fruits of slavery” (167); there is an understood parallel between “fruits of slavery” and the Pauline catalog of the “works of the flesh”—a list that includes “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, [and] dissensions,” among other things (Gal. 5.20). Foote carefully notes that such quarrelsome behavior can be racially motivated and betrays a “spirit of error” rather than one of truth: “How many at the present day profess great spirituality, and even holiness, and yet are deluded by a spirit of error, which leads them to say to the poor and the colored ones among them, ‘Stand back a little—I am holier than thou’” (167). In short, Foote begins her narrative, which can be read as an extended theological meditation on holiness and sanctification, by showing the dangers of false holiness. As she says in her preface, those who “possess a prejudiced or sectarian spirit” can never be “fully in the truth” (163). For Foote, racism is symptomatic of a spiritual malady because it keeps prejudiced individuals from full life in the Holy Spirit, or as she calls it, the “Spirit of Truth” (167).

By relating the story of her mother’s encounter with prejudice at the communion table immediately after a description of her parents’ “hardships in slavery” (166), Foote is turning the tables on the meaning of “slavery” itself. The behavior of the racist white congregants is juxtaposed with that of slave masters, and both are positioned as completely antithetical to the Holy Spirit. Turning again to Galatians, we find Paul’s argument that Christianity calls people to “freedom” in Christ, and the Holy Spirit allows brothers and sisters in Christ to “become slaves to one another [through love]” (Galatians 5.13). It is possible to contrast the kind of body-and-soul-crushing slavery and discrimination experienced by Foote’s parents with the radical Christian notion of Jesus’

commandment to “ ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (Gal. 5.14), enslaved to others through love. Foote uses the political/historical context of slavery and her personal background (parentage) to do more than rail against the hazards of racism and bigotry, dangers that were only too real during the time she was writing in an America experiencing the rise of Jim Crow. Additionally, Foote foregrounds the legacy of slavery as one that is threatening to salvation, a potential perversion of holiness. As outlined by Foote, the inheritance of slavery is particularly dangerous because it is inherently sinful and bears fruit through other kinds of sin, making it all the more difficult to obtain sanctification, a state of holiness that precludes sin. Just as sin becomes the birthright for all humans born after the Fall (Adam and Eve), so the legacy of slavery is an American birthright that may lead both blacks and whites away from God, particularly when whites are poor Christian examples for their black brothers and sisters.<sup>9</sup>

In the historical record, the sinful “fruits of slavery” were growing rapidly in the decade after the Civil War. Foote published her autotheography at the end of the 1870s when, particularly in the South, blacks were systematically being disenfranchised and denied basic human rights; prisons and poverty were the institutions taking the place of slavery; mob violence was on the rise (Du Bois 694-701).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, poor

---

<sup>9</sup> Foote claims that her parents were led astray in just such a manner: “My parents continued to attend to the ordinances of God as instructed, but knew little of the power of Christ to save; for their spiritual guides were as blind as those they led” (167).

<sup>10</sup> Historians have pointed to the late 1870s as the time when Reconstruction was ending. Eric Foner dates the period of Reconstruction from 1863-1877 (see preface, xxvii), beginning with Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and concluding with Hayes’s inauguration in 1877: “As a period when Republicans controlled Southern politics, blacks enjoyed extensive political power, and the federal government accepted responsibility for protecting the fundamental rights of black citizens, Reconstruction came to an irrevocable end with the inauguration of Hayes” (587). Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham points out that, from 1880 to 1920, the black church was a post-Reconstruction powerhouse when it came to resisting rising racial discrimination, and women were essential to the growth and functioning of this important institution: “the [black] church served as the most effective vehicle by which men and women alike, pushed down by racism and poverty, regrouped and rallied against emotional and physical defeat” (1). For a more complex picture of the post-Reconstruction period, “a period that has come to be known simultaneously as

whites found themselves “faced by the dilemma of recognizing the Negroes as equals or of bending every effort to still keep them beneath the white mass in income and social power” (Du Bois 350). Overlapping tensions between class and race were playing out as a “determined psychology of caste” was reinforced:

In every possible way it was impressed and advertised that the white was superior and the Negro an inferior race. This inferiority must be publicly acknowledged and submitted to. Titles of courtesy were denied colored men and women. Certain signs of servility and usages amounting to public and personal insult were insisted upon. The most educated and deserving black man was compelled in many public places to occupy a place beneath the lowest and least deserving of the whites.  
(Du Bois 695)

Though intensifying in specific ways at the end of the nineteenth century, this racialized “psychology of caste” was nothing new. In fact, although the discrimination experienced by Foote’s mother at the communion table took place before emancipation, it is possible to draw a line from such encounters to the post-Reconstruction racial climate Du Bois describes above. Through bigoted racial solidarity, poor whites could align themselves with their richer white counterparts to avoid certain indignities of class inequity. However, as exemplified by the behavior of the white “mother in Israel” described by Foote (167), more affluent whites could also reinforce their own class position as better than both poor whites and all blacks by maintaining the niceties of social hierarchy in a church setting through communion service (higher-class whites served first, then poor whites, then blacks). Foote seems to imply that her mother was more deserving than any of the whites who would not allow blacks to “partake of the Lord’s Supper until the lowest of the whites had been served,” even though they “[loved] the same God, [were]

---

the ‘women’s era’ and the ‘nadir’ in American race relations” (Higginbotham 1), see Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent*, Martha S. Jones’s *All Bound Up Together* (esp. 171), and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore’s *Gender and Jim Crow*.

members of the same church, and [were] expecting to find the same heaven at last” (167). We can understand Foote’s take on these class/racial tensions from the perspective of the time of the communion occurrence itself (before her birth) and from the period when Foote wrote it down. In both eras, the “doctrine of racial separation” was in operation as part of slavery’s heritage (Du Bois 700). Conscious of continuing prejudice, Foote utilizes an incident from an earlier period to remind her readers that racial discrimination is the polar opposite of spirit-filled behavior.

By opening her autotheography with two stories of injustice experienced by her parents (slavery and discrimination within the church), Foote firmly contextualizes her work as a “social gospel” (Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit* 9). For Foote, the spirit of holiness and the blessings of sanctification do not make sense outside of the framework of social justice. More importantly, in characterizing racial discrimination as a perversion of the Holy Spirit’s message that must be overcome, Foote sets the tone for the rest of her narrative. The poisonous tree of slavery bears *sinful* fruit, and must be dealt with on *spiritual* terms. Foote’s solution for the ills of racism (and later, sexism) is religious rather than merely political/historical, part of God’s plan rather than a secular timeline. Foote teaches us how to read her text: her life story is a vehicle to “testify more extensively to the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus Christ to save from all sin” (163), not an end in itself. Throughout her book, Foote guides her readers to focus on her Christian testimony and theology by using metaphoric, spiritual terms to frame the events of her life, often turning to biblical allusions to anchor her prose. Only in the very beginning of her autotheography, where Foote is constrained by slave narrative conventions, are such biblical phrases strangely absent. Only when Foote commences her spiritual narrative

does she position herself as “free.” But it is a different kind of authorial freedom, the *freedom to serve* Christ and one another (or, in this case, the reader) rather than *freedom from* slavery.

This authorial freedom to serve the reader is explicitly shown in the textual instances when God calls and covenants Foote to extend the covenant and call of salvation to others. One of the most powerful chapters of her autotheography, “Heavenly Visitations Again,” describes her divine calling to preach the gospel and a dream-like mystical experience wherein she is essentially baptized by Christ himself and offered fruit from a special tree by the Holy Ghost (202-203). This fruit, which Foote describes as having “a taste like nothing I had ever tasted before,” seems to be a manifestation of the kind of spiritual fruit that she contrasts with the “fruits of slavery” in the first chapter of her autotheography. Significantly, in the midst of this mystical experience, Christ “appeared to write something with a golden pen and golden ink, upon golden paper... [saying] ‘Put this in your bosom, and, wherever you go, show it, and they will know that I have sent you to proclaim salvation to all’” (203). When Foote comes to and the visitation is ended, she discovers that her “letter of authority” is written in her heart, “to be shown in my life, instead of in my hand” (203). Foote reads her own life as a witness to God’s power and a testimony to salvation through Christ. She claims her credentials are from God, and her autotheography is a written manifestation of the golden spiritual letter in her heart.

### **Contending with the “Pastoral Office”**

Despite the fact that her weightiest letter of endorsement comes from God, Foote's autotheography is also prefaced by that traditional discursive form that could lend credibility to the words of a marginalized (black) author: the letter of authentication by a (white) sponsor containing "endorsements of his or her character" (Andrews, "Novelization of Voice" 27). In terms of Foote's autotheography, the introduction to her work penned by Rev. Thomas K. Doty, founder and editor of the *Christian Harvester* (one of the many publications of the American holiness movement),<sup>11</sup> also serves the function of "placing the narrative in an intellectual context and interpreting perspective" (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 35). If Doty's framing is any indicator, the context and interpretive point of view for Foote's book will be the "sublime cause of Holiness" itself, heavily influenced by the particular social position occupied by Foote as a black, female preacher in the holiness movement (165).

In addition to elucidating the gendered aspects of the "pastoral office," Doty's introduction can also be read against Foote's own words in terms of the racial makeup of her audience, as the concept of social justice is addressed differently in each (Doty 164). While Doty seems to perform more theoretical readings of liberatory texts from Acts and Galatians in order to legitimize Foote's positionality for a white audience, Foote uses descriptions of racial discrimination and her own racial identification to directly address black readers: "My earnest desire is that many—especially of my own race—may be led to believe and enter into rest...sweet soul rest" (163). She wants to publish a text that will elucidate the doctrine of sanctification at an affordable price ("many have not the means

---

<sup>11</sup> Melvin Easterday Dieter points to the New York *Christian Advocate* as "the most prestigious voice in Methodism" (210), but a number of other "advocates," "evangelists," "Pentecosts," and other such journals/magazines/reviews flourished during the nineteenth century, seeming to sprout wherever the holiness movement spread.



of purchasing large and expensive works on this important Bible theme," 163). Because it is affordable and intelligible to readers who have experienced discrimination, Foote's text becomes a social gospel of sanctification that is accessible to poorer readers and those of "her own race"; because it is justified by Doty's introduction, it is accessible to an already-theologically-literate, potentially more affluent white audience.

At the outset, Doty acknowledges Foote's role as itinerant evangelist who demonstrates both a pure life and a successful ministry (164). He then goes on to defend her for the "three great crimes" that her readership might accuse her of: 1) "Color," 2) "Womanhood," and 3) being a (female) "Evangelist" (164). Refuting each of these potential arguments, Doty alludes to biblical passages that suggest equality and social justice across race and gender divides to show that Foote, a woman born to former slaves, has a legitimate role to play as a religious figure.

Doty quotes Acts 17.26 and 10.34 to point out that there cannot be any "crime in color," since God "hath made of one blood all nations of men" and is "no respecter of persons" (164). In fact, in Doty's words, "Holiness takes the prejudice out of color," since "The [heart's] the standard of the man'." (Note the agency Doty ascribes to the concept of holiness, here; Foote's text will also ascribe a kind of agency to holiness through the doctrine of sanctification.) Next, in terms of the "crime of Womanhood," Doty references Paul's liberating words in Galatians 3.28, "in Christ 'there is neither male nor female'." Through the logic of this verse, the miracle of Christ atoning for the sins of the world allows the binaries that comprise traditional social distinctions, including Jew/Greek, slave/free, and male/female, to be rendered meaningless. Doty seems to extend this logic to his final point as he discusses Foote's role as "Evangelist," saying,

"We respect the pastoral office highly, for we know the heart of a pastor; but while the regular field-hands are reaping, pray, let Ruth glean" (164). Through this shrewd sentence construction, Doty effectively implies that Foote herself has the "heart of a pastor," which would go beyond the traditional female role of exhortation and into the male realm of scriptural interpretation and spiritual direction of others.<sup>12</sup> By referencing the biblical story of Ruth, Doty sanctions the path that Foote takes in writing her spiritual autobiography, a text full of theology and biblical interpretation; just as Ruth "takes advantage of Israelite law, which required farmers to leave a part of their harvest for gleaning by the poor, the alien, and widows" (Coogan, 393 HB), Foote takes advantage of God's calling to preach and reaps a harvest of believers through her obedience to this call. And although Foote is turning to the written word (instead of the spoken word) as an extension of her call by penning an autobiography, Doty nevertheless closes the introduction by describing her oral abilities: "Those of us who heard her preach, last year...where she held the almost breathless attention of five thousand people, by the eloquence of the Holy Ghost, know well where is the hiding of her power" (164-65).

It is no accident that Doty emphasizes Foote's oral power, claiming that she preached through the "eloquence of the Holy Ghost" (165); within the Methodist ethos, orality was crucial to the authority of the speaker and the success of her ministry. The fact that Foote could capture the attention of thousands at a camp meeting is an important testament to her ministerial call. Camp meetings were days- or week(s)-long events;

---

<sup>12</sup> In an editorial footnote to Jarena Lee's *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836), Andrews notes that, "Among the Methodists, both white and black, exhortation was regularly distinguished from true preaching.... Exhorters were not licensed to speak from or interpret a biblical text. They were expected to limit themselves to pleas for close attention to the message preached, repentance, and acceptance of the present opportunity for salvation" (*Sisters of the Spirit* 239).

hundreds of people would come from miles around to set up their tents in rural areas, creating large central spaces to hear preaching and participate in worship through prayer and hymn-singing (Pierce 98-99). Although efforts were often made to segregate whites and blacks in attendance by designating an area “set at the back of the larger camp meeting” for blacks, “the two services often merged” (Pierce 99). Diverse participants, exhorters, and ministers worshipped together and dedicated themselves to God. For black attendees, these temporary breakdowns of boundaries across lines of race, class, gender, age, and church hierarchy were particularly significant: “Conversion and sanctification offered African Americans access to a larger community of believers, and the camp-meeting rituals of Christian faith provided a level field to believers, regardless of sex and race” (Pierce 102). Most importantly, the preachers who could effect these conversions need not be licensed ministers, “the ‘elevated’ white men of learning and faith” (Pierce 102). Especially in a camp meeting setting, the oral culture of Methodism created the conditions that made the gospel story come alive in the moment, even if a black woman told that blessed story: “The preaching of early Methodism—the sound of the Holy Spirit—was at the heart of Methodist ideology precisely because it made the gospel an event” (Mathews 20). The immediacy of the gospel message, its “now”-ness, had a counterpart in the performance of the itinerant preacher.

In fact, two things were happening at once during the nineteenth century that began to pry open the door for women in ministry, particularly as itinerant preachers. On the one hand, a veritable culture of reinterpretation existed in terms of “the woman question,” especially in relation to the Bible (scriptural defenses) and the role of women

in the church.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the holiness movement put a premium on testimony inspired by the Holy Spirit: “It was the theology of the movement and the essential nature of the place of public testimony in the holiness experience which gave many an otherwise timid woman the authority and the power to speak out ‘as the Holy Spirit led her.’ To those who allowed the theology, the logic was irrefutable” (Dieter 42).<sup>14</sup> When the Holy Spirit leads, the believer (male or female) must do God's will.

But how did an individual know if s/he was being called to preach? This question is fundamental to the autotheographies of Foote and other women like her who had to navigate the space between “exhortation” and “preaching.” The distinction is an important one; as one of Foote's predecessors, Jarena Lee, notes in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836), it could be difficult for a black woman to follow her God-given calling to preach (interpreting scripture) rather than to simply exhort (telling the story of her own conversion and calling others to salvation) (Lee 36, 42; Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit* 239).<sup>15</sup> The issue was whether or not women like Lee would receive official sanction from the church to pursue a preaching career within the confines of their respective denominations (the African Methodist Episcopal Church or the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church). Bettye Collier-Thomas describes Lee's work as important to Foote and other women who were part of the next generation of itinerant preachers: “As the first woman to be licensed to preach in the AME Church, Jarena Lee

---

<sup>13</sup> See Martha Jones (158-160, 184-199, esp. 196), Collier-Thomas (*Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* 58-68; 83-84), Hardesty (57, 63), and Stanley (132-139).

<sup>14</sup> See also Collier-Thomas (*Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* 25-26).

<sup>15</sup> The full title of Lee's book is *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself*. This is the first edition of Lee's autobiography; an expanded second version of her autobiography, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, was published in 1849 (Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit* 23). For more on Jarena Lee's initial conflict with the AME Church through the person of Richard Allen and the importance of her acts of publishing, see Martha Jones (40-41) and Carla Peterson (74-75, 78).

was instrumental in laying the groundwork for women who desired to preach” (*Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* 83).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, speaking of “Boston reformer and public thinker Maria Stewart” as well as Lee and Foote, Martha Jones explains, “These path breakers defied convention, speaking publicly without the sanction of male leaders. At the same time, they used the podium and the pulpit to call attention to the contradictions embedded in a public culture that sought to undo discrimination based on race while letting stand differences rationalized through gender” (7). Although they were part of two different generations, both Lee and Foote initially struggled with their relationship to an all-male clergy who did not support their preaching.

In Foote’s narrative, Jehiel C. Beman is the individual she must contend with as a representative of the male clergy. A free black, Beman served as the pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Boston from 1838 to 1845 (Finkenbine 178-179). Beman was an important social and political figure in the community: in addition to his pastoral duties with his own congregation—which grew from a membership of 17 to one of 140 within a couple years of his arrival (James 141)—Beman was also active in abolitionist work through the American Anti-Slavery Society, the Massachusetts Abolition Society, and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, often writing for activist publications such as the *Liberator* and the *Emancipator* (Finkenbine 179-80; James 144). Additionally, Beman was involved in the AME Zion church hierarchy at its highest levels, “actively [participating] in the General Conference sessions, meetings held every four years to elect a new bishop and discuss church business” (James 142).

Despite Beman’s high level of community influence, Foote characterizes Beman as threatened by her and opposed to her desire to preach a doctrine of sanctification

---

<sup>16</sup> For more on the “new generation of young women” after Lee, see Martha Jones (88).

(205). Foote seems to have preached wherever she was welcomed; when Beman did not allow her to preach in his church's hall proper, Foote says she spoke at the home of one of the congregation members (205).<sup>17</sup> Apparently, Beman would have none of it, implying that any congregants who invited Foote to speak in their homes would be excommunicated. When Foote held meetings in her "own house," Beman again stymied her efforts (205-206). According to Foote, Beman tried to undermine her authority and malign her character by telling an "actual falsehood" about her, claiming that she asked to speak from his pulpit and would not be "satisfied with any other place" (206). Beman also accused her of trying to divide his Boston congregation, threatened her with excommunication, and told her not to preach anywhere in Boston (Foote 205-206).

In light of the fact that there was a good deal of competition for membership among Boston's black churches (of which there were five established before the Civil War), it stands to reason that Beman did not want his congregation of not-quite-200 members threatened (Finkenbine 173). Revivals in Boston's congregations had stirred up religious fervor, but with numerous doctrines being debated across the churches and an increasing influx of fugitive slaves, there were no guarantees in terms of the acquisition and retention of churchgoers (Finkenbine 173, 182). Consequently, when Foote stepped onto the scene espousing her convictions about Christian perfection, it is not surprising that "Beman and his church council refused to permit this effrontery to AMEZ doctrine" (Finkenbine 174).

---

<sup>17</sup> Foote's preaching in homes where she was welcomed resonates with Jualynne Dodson's point that "local congregations had the freedom to evaluate by their own criteria the authenticity of a woman's calling as well as her hermeneutic skills" (55).

In her autotheography, Foote relies on scripture in rejoinder to Beman's efforts to keep her from preaching a message of holiness in Boston. Rather than dignify Beman's petty, "false" accusations with an equally petty response, Foote followed the instructions Jesus gave to his disciples when he commissioned them to preach: "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them" (Mark 6.11; Foote 206). Foote also took her grievances to the greater church hierarchy by addressing a letter to the conference concerning her situation (206), and although she did not seem to receive any reply to this letter, Foote manages to enact a "textual revenge" on Beman and the church as a whole (Grammer 40), saying, "My letter was slightly noticed... Why should they notice it? It was only the grievance of a woman, and there was no justice meted out to women in those days. Even ministers of Christ did not feel that women had any rights which they were bound to respect" (Foote 207). Here, Foote combines divine law and secular jurisprudence by using the biblical-sounding phraseology "no justice meted out to women in those days"<sup>18</sup> together with rights-language "reminiscent of the opinion of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, whose vitriolic response to the 1857 [Dred Scott] case... included the famous contention that the Negro 'had no rights which the white man was bound to respect' " (Moody 147-48). Foote gives her gendered "grievance" the weight of scriptural, historical and legal authority by distancing her autobiographical voice from her own lifetime ("in those days") while exposing the corruption of purportedly judicious ministers in her contemporary moment.

---

<sup>18</sup> The phrase "in those days" occurs numerous times in the Bible. For instance, see the phrase repeated frequently in Judges, chapters 17-21: "*In those days* there was no king in Israel" (my emphasis, Judges 21.25).

As if to further her point about the importance of women in the church and the injustice that occurs when women are denied, Foote next turns to the Bible itself, utilizing scriptures such as Joel 2.28-29 ("I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy... Even on the male and female slaves... I will pour out my spirit") and Galatians 3.28 ("There is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus") as well as a detailed explanation of the way in which poor hermeneutics can cause one word to be translated in two highly gendered, and therefore highly misleading, ways ("helper" or "servant of the church" when applied to women, but as "minister" when applied to men, 209). Clearly, Foote is a learned woman, comfortable interpreting scripture in audacious ways that remind her that her "commission was from heaven" and that listening to Christ's voice, not man's (or men's), is key (208). In the same way, she tells her "Christian sisters" that they should listen to God rather than man, instructing them, "[do] not let what man may say or do, keep you from doing the will of the Lord or using the gifts you have for the good of others" (227).

Reading Foote's scriptural exegesis and her construction of her readers as "Christian sisters" makes it easy to view her as a proto-feminist theologian, one who has been "particularly attuned to the intricate relationship of language, identity, empowerment, and religion... [noting] with ruthless clarity that the position of women in Christianity has often been both unspoken and literally unspeakable, that silence and oppression are closely interwoven" (Lobody 128). Foote implies (loudly) that silence is not an acceptable option for her or for any other woman whom God has called to voice. However, in some sense, Foote was not breaking new ground by pointing to gendered injustices in traditional biblical hermeneutics since she was already participating in a



church tradition that implicitly questioned certain hierarchies. Donald G. Mathews notes that Methodism presents an "alternative model for what constituted the legitimate relationship between clergy and laity, a relationship that was a metaphor for all power relationships" (Mathews 22). Foote is being a good Methodist when she navigates the scriptures to find evidence for "alternative models" of leadership. Although such models may have been particularly liberating for Foote when she came up against resistance from male ministers in terms of her calling to preach, when it came to her marriage, she discovered at least one particular "power relationship" that proved more difficult to navigate. Defining herself as simultaneously spiritual *and* domestic turned out to be one of the biggest challenges she ever faced.

### **Troubling Spousal Reconciliation**

In a chapter entitled "Icons of Holiness and Instruments of Morality" from *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism*, A. Gregory Schneider points to the unique position of wives in Christian marriages during the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, a wife might wield a certain amount of influence through her supposedly inherent "moral purity" (174), but she was still subject to her husband. "Wives were to rule by the power of mildness, by a mortification of self and self-will that would endear them to their husbands and thus win them an empire of the heart's affections" (Schneider 174). According to Foote, after she experienced sanctification and began talking with others about holiness, her husband George found any "mortification of self" by which she might influence him to be suspect, indicative of

a holier-than-thou attitude. He said to her, “ ‘Julia, I don’t think I can ever believe myself as holy as you think you are’ ” (Foote 196). Disapproving of her zeal for “heart purity,” George “began to speak against it” (196). As Yolanda Pierce points out in her discussion of Zilpha Elaw (another nineteenth-century black woman who was called to preach), the self-imposed restrictions necessary to lead a holy, sanctified life freed women like Foote and Elaw from the physical and spiritual control of their husbands, who often loathed them for “embracing sanctification doctrine” (97).

Doctrinal differences may not have been the only issue, however. Historians such as Elsa Barkley Brown remind us that intraracial negotiations between black men and women could make marital disagreements like the one between Foote and her husband even more complex, since the trappings of masculinity and femininity available to whites in nineteenth-century America were not as readily available to blacks. For instance, instead of being thought of as possessing an inherent “moral purity” (Schneider 174), black women routinely faced “accusations of immorality” and were “denied the protections of womanhood” (Brown 144). As a result, “increasingly black women relied on constructing not only a respectable womanhood but, in large measure, an invisible womanhood” (Brown 144). In a context where the race itself was on trial and black women could easily be accused of forward or promiscuous behavior, George Foote may not have wanted his wife to “exhort and pray with the people,” traveling “from house to house” in his absence (Foote 200). (Foote notes that she had a lot of free time to visit others in this manner, since she did not have children and because her husband “worked in Chelsea, and could not come to look after [her] welfare but once a week,” 198 and 192.)

Despite Foote's seeming disregard for her husband's wishes on the subject of holiness, she nevertheless portrays herself as a devout woman in her autotheography, the kind of woman who would have likely embraced the God-given metaphoric framework for marriage described in Ephesians 5.22-25: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands." Although she does not directly address these verses, Foote seems to have some working biblical framework for male headship, as the issue of her husband's spiritual leadership produces sore conflict for Foote in her text. Foote seems anxious to facilitate her husband's spiritual headship, and is almost overwhelmed when her husband leads her in prayer rather than the other way around: "We knelt in prayer together, my husband leading, and he seemed much affected while praying. To me it was a precious season, though there was an indescribable something between us—something dark and high" (196). Notice that Foote seems to be affected herself because her husband is affected, but even in this moment where he seems to pray fervently for a change of heart, Foote sees an "indescribable something" that coalesces into a "dark shadow" that never again left her husband's face (196). Foote's initial fears for her marriage and her husband "because he was not sanctified" have been realized (190). Despite her pious example, the "unbelieving husband" cannot be "sanctified by the believing wife" (Schneider 174).

To allay her grief and fears as her husband, a sailor, shipped out yet again without having received sanctification, Foote turns to her most reliable source of comfort: her Bible.

While under this apparent cloud, I took the Bible to my closet, asking Divine aid. As I opened the book, my eyes fell on these words: "For thy Maker is thine husband" [Isa. 54:5]. I then read the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah over and over again. It seemed to me that I had never seen it before. I went forth glorifying God. (197)

To make sense of Foote's account of her encounter with Isaiah 54, Elizabeth Elkin Grammer suggests that we see Foote as performing a "radical redefinition" of domesticity as " 'domestic' obligations to the children of God continually push her outside the confines of her actual home" (48). Grammer observes that Foote "finds herself torn between her religious beliefs and her domestic obligations, between God and her husband" (48), and she reads Foote's encounter with Isaiah 54.5 as a "verbal formula that dissolves this conflict": "Borrowing a figure from the Bible, [Foote] reconstructs the canon of domesticity, transporting it from the realm of social prescriptions to that of metaphor.... 'Thy maker is thy husband,' God tells Foote; therefore, the whole world is 'home,' and every converted soul is a son or a daughter" (48). While this reading neatly takes care of Foote's issues with her husband and also valorizes her decision to pursue a preaching career, Grammer does not address the fact that Foote does not actually state the significance of Isaiah 54.5 in her own mind. All Foote tells us is that she asks for "Divine aid" and her "eyes fell on these words: 'For thy Maker is thine husband' " (197). The sentences that follow this revelation to close Foote's chapter are themselves revealing, more for what they don't say than what they do: "I then read the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah over and over again. It seemed to me that I had never seen it before. I went forth glorifying God" (197). What does Foote actually see for the first time in this chapter of Isaiah?

Richard J. Douglass-Chin suggests in *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists* that Foote is employing a "well-calculated maneuver that she repeatedly uses" by selectively quoting from Isaiah 54 (125). For him, Foote performs a kind of silent signification, here, one in which the implied-but-not-quoted verses preceding her biblical reference must "argue for her" (126). Douglass-Chin points out that Isaiah 54 begins, "Sing, O barren woman, / you who never bore a child" (125); he contends, parenthetically and tongue-in-cheek, that "Foote...signifies silently and/or indirectly upon the tenets of the cult of true womanhood. (What "true" woman would burst into rapturous song at her own inability to keep a husband and bear children?)" (126). What Douglass-Chin does not take into account, however, is that Isaiah 54 is part of a larger context of the second half of Isaiah, one in which Jerusalem is the "wife" (and mother) and the Lord is the "husband." Jerusalem/Zion is repeatedly represented as a "mother of a dispersed and depressed family, and as a woman destined no longer to be forsaken, bereaved, or infertile" (Coogan, 1054 HB). This barren woman sings because her barrenness, her exile, is temporary; Isaiah 54 enacts a "spousal reconciliation between the Lord and Jerusalem" (Coogan, 1054 HB).

In the context of Foote's difficult situation with her husband, both Grammer's and Douglass-Chin's readings have some merit, but they both depend on Foote's rejection of domesticity in order to claim the Lord as spouse, the father of her spiritual children. And yes, there is a sense of comfort that Foote seems to derive from the portrayal of God as her heavenly spouse. Yet the other comforting possibility that Isaiah 54 presents is a potential reconciliation between Foote and her earthly spouse. In fact, if we examine an

earlier moment in Foote's autotheography where she turned to the Bible for solace after the departure of her husband-to-be, we find her quoting Colossians 1.19, "For it pleased the Father that in him [Christ] should all fullness dwell" (190). Although she does not directly quote it, this particular verse goes on to say, "and through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1.20). (Foote briefly alludes to this verse when she proclaims, "He is indeed my reconciled God, the Christ Jesus whose precious blood is all my righteousness," 191.) Juxtaposing these verses from Colossians with Isaiah 54 and Ephesians 5.22-25, the metaphors become fluid and volatile; relationships between the Lord and Jerusalem, Christ and the church, and George and Julia Foote take on a liminal quality as the potential for full reconciliation between and across participants in these relationships is renewed again and again in the metaphoric economy of sanctification. Reconciliations, "whether on earth or in heaven," are made possible by Christ's sacrifice (Col. 1.20). George and Julia could be reconciled, just as Julia finds herself continuously reconciled with Christ and as the Lord is reconciled with Jerusalem. Even more importantly, George could be reconciled with Christ and experience the "sweet soul rest" of sanctification.

The point of this line of reasoning is not to suggest that George Foote ever obtained sanctification; in fact, the emotional distance that Foote maintains in the last half of her autotheography seems to suggest that he did not, and the circumstances of his death are not really revealed to us (to say nothing of Foote's emotions—"None but the dear Lord knew what my feelings were," 217). Rather, by holding up the possibility of reconciliation of George and Christ through sanctification, I am suggesting that Foote

continuously uses the terms and metaphors of sanctification to cope with the toughest and most problematic times of her life. By organizing the events of her life around this sublime doctrine and its congruous metaphors such as a "brand plucked from the burning," Foote positions herself as a strong agent in her material, spiritual, and textual worlds.

### **Sanctification "Now": Foote as Methodist Theologian**

Throughout her autotheography, the possibilities for reconciliation between characters in the narrative (e.g. between George and Christ or between Christ and Foote herself) are dramatized as a reminder that such reconciliation is also possible for Christ and the reader. To see how Foote creates a climate of accessibility in her textual methods, negotiating a specific space for her readers to have the opportunity to "believe" and experience the "sweet soul rest" of sanctification, we must look to the end of her book. In the last chapter of her autotheography, Foote calls her readers to faith, and thereby sanctification, by asking the question that her entire narrative has been leading up to: "How is sanctification to be obtained?" She quickly answers her own query: "Faith is the only condition of sanctification. By this I mean a faith that dies out to the world and every form of sin; that gives up the sin of the heart; and that believes, according to God's promise, he is able to perform, and will do it now—doeth it now" (234). Foote goes on to directly address the reader in the sentence immediately following this declaration of faith. "Why not yield, believe, and be sanctified now—now, while reading?" (234).

This obvious emphasis on immediacy (heightened by repetition of the word "now") is the culmination of the work begun in the preface of her book. In that preface, Foote declares that her object is "to testify more extensively to the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus Christ to save from all sin" (163). In order to give a shorthand explanation of what this "salvation from all sin in this life" entails (a salvation that she will later refer to as "sanctification"), Foote turns to Paul's words in Galatians 2.20: "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (qtd. in Foote: 163). Reading Foote's call to sanctification through faith (from the last chapter of her autotheography) next to Galatians 2.20 (quoted in her preface), it is clear that Foote is modeling her sanctification theology on Paul's transcendent temporality.<sup>19</sup>

Examining Paul's verse through Foote, sanctification makes the individual conscious of Christ's sacrifice at multiple moments in time. Following Paul's impossible (and therefore wondrous) logic, the believer is "crucified with Christ," and presumably dead. Yet neither Christ nor the believer stays dead; as Paul says, "I live," and in a kind of near-possession that entralls the subjectivity of the believer, "Christ liveth in me." Notice that this indwelling "life" is continuous (Christ "liveth"—present continuous tense), seeming to cover the past (Christ "*gave* himself for me" and "*loved* me") as well as the present body ("I *now* live in the flesh"—the flesh is simultaneously transcendent

---

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, in his sermon "Christian Perfection" (first published in 1741), also scrutinizes the words of Paul in Galatians 2.20 to guide Christians who would be sanctified: "Every one of these can say with St. Paul, 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me'—words that manifestly describe a deliverance from inward as well as from outward sin. This is expressed both negatively, 'I live not'—my evil nature, the body of sin, is destroyed—and positively, 'Christ liveth in me'—and therefore all that is holy, and just, and good. Indeed both these, 'Christ liveth in me,' and 'I live not,' are inseparably connected; for 'what communion hath light with darkness' or 'Christ with Belial?' " (118).



and vulnerable) and future ("nevertheless, I *live*," and live on). In this reading, Christ's sacrifice is not a one-time event, but rather a giving that occurs again and again, at each moment in time (now, and now... and now); no one moment can overwhelm or cover the others, but the believer can be assured of the continual renewal of this sacrifice.

Significantly, in her preface, Foote quotes Luke 11.9, "Ask, and ye shall receive," directly on the heels of Galatians 2.20. She does not comment on a connection between these verses; in fact, she doesn't seem to see any break between Christ's sacrifice and the penitent's asking (and, to complete the biblical allusion, "seeking" and "knocking"). The give-and-take between Christ and the Christian is cyclical and necessary, but always has a predictable outcome: "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11.10).

Using the preface and the final chapter of Foote's autobiography as bookends for her larger project, we can see a kind of mutual giving between Christ and the believer, a continuous communion that requires careful attention on the believer's part while also allowing for Christ's continual intervention. The believer must have faith that God has promised salvation and "is able to perform, and will do it now—doeth it now" (Foote 234). Again, as with Gal. 2.20, Foote draws attention to the miraculous logic of sanctification; God "*is able to perform*" (present, also implying that God has been able to perform in the past), "*will do it now*" (seemingly future, qualified immediately by "now," bringing it back to the present)—"doeth it now" (continually acts in the present to fulfill promises of salvation and allow for sanctification).

Foote's machinations of verb tense seem to be right in line with the overall theological ethos of Methodists when it comes to salvation: "The Methodist could not say

'I have been saved!' and leave the sacred event at that. The Methodist had to say: 'I have been saved, I am saved, I may be saved, I shall one day be saved.' Both act and anticipation sustained the believer; but experience was a promise and not a final contract" (Mathews 21). Notice that Mathews points to the same conditional verb tenses that engage Foote's construction of salvation and, by extension, sanctification; past, present, and future are continually reenacted in a faith process that involves a series of sacred occurrences, part of a larger narrative of the progress of holiness. The impulse that causes Foote to quote Galatians 2.20 and immediately follow it with Luke 11.9 (without any additional commentary) is the same one that is dramatized throughout her autobiography: with Wesley-like sensibility, Foote seems to reference sanctification in a paradoxical manner, claiming it to be both instantaneous and progressive, with agency on both God's part and the believer's. She sees no disconnect between these potentially disparate conceptions.

John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism (and its primary theologian), described the ideal Methodist as a person who "continually presents his soul and "body a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God"; entirely and without reserve devoting himself, all he has, all he is, to His glory" (from Wesley's *Plain Account*, qtd. in Raser: 228). According to Harold E. Raser, Wesley paradoxically describes Christian perfection (also termed "sanctification") as a process that is "both instantaneous and gradual" (232). In Wesley's words, this event is one that "we are to expect... not at death, but every moment; that *now* is the accepted time, *now* is the day of this salvation" (my emphasis, qtd. in Raser: 232). Although Wesley also emphasized the importance of the experiences of the individual in guiding the steps and rate of the salvation process, including sanctification,

he nevertheless highlighted the potential immediacy of sanctification (Raser 234; Wesley 105). Like Wesley, Foote also references 2 Corinthians 6.2, "Now is the day of salvation," in her call to sanctification (Foote 234). Out of the labyrinth of verb tenses Foote presents to dramatize sanctification, "now" appears triumphant.

What, then, are the rhetorical consequences of such immediacy ("now"-ness)? What textual maneuvers allow Foote to rhetorically construct the urgency of various "sketches" of her life, those situations that she draws attention to in her relatively brief autotheography? In order to answer these questions and unpack Foote's systematic theology, we must turn again to the typology Foote presents in both the title of her autobiography and its epigraph, taken from Zechariah 3.2: "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" (Foote 161).

Foote does not give her readers the background for this verse; she probably expects us to either have some inkling of its larger connotations or the ability to look it up for ourselves. (After all, she makes a point of pressing her readers to increase their biblical literacy through active research, saying, "Will you not hunt [these verses] up, and read carefully and prayerfully for yourselves?" [230].) In any case, the book of Zechariah is set during a key restoration period in the Bible, the time when Jewish Babylonian exiles were allowed to return to Judah and try to rebuild their society (of which the Temple was the central piece) alongside those who had never actually left their homeland (Coogan, 1357 HB). Specifically, Zechariah 3 depicts one of the prophet's many visions, this time involving Joshua and *Satan* (in Hebrew, "the Adversary," not to be confused with the personage who would come to be known as "Satan," God's evil arch-enemy [Coogan 1359 HB]). Here, "the Adversary" is a kind of "heavenly prosecutor," and

Joshua is facing a "heavenly trial" (Coogan 1359 HB). Symbolically, Joshua becomes "a brand plucked from the fire," a man who metaphorically escapes the "fire" of his accuser ("the Adversary") when the Lord steps in, rebuking "the Adversary" because he (the Lord) has already chosen Jerusalem (and, by extension, Joshua) for a special covenant relationship. In essence, Joshua's trial-by-fire as a "brand plucked from the fire" is emblematic of Israel's trials in captivity, a captivity that is now ending thanks to the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon to rebuild the temple, their lives, and their nation.

Of course, the larger biblical narrative of the captivity of the Hebrews begins not in Babylon, but much earlier, in Egypt, with the story of the Exodus. In both instances, the declaration and rebuilding of nation was an important part of the emancipation process. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. argues that, for black Americans during the nineteenth century, "nation language emerged out of the common insult of slavery, the persistence and entrenchment of white supremacist beliefs in the social and political fabric... and the need to keep alive the memory of these realities" (9). The way to cope with the hardships and legacy of slavery was to find a key biblical parallel: "By appropriating Exodus, [African Americans] articulated their own sense of peoplehood and secured for themselves a common history and destiny as they elevated their experiences to biblical drama" (Glaude 9). The story of the unjust and torturous captivity of the Israelites, along with their emancipation through the leadership of Moses and the eventual rebuilding of their nation beginning with Joshua, gave black Americans a common language to argue for abolition and promote racial solidarity (Glaude 9-10).

By raising the specter of Israel's emancipation/salvation, Foote seems to place her autobiographical sketch in the overarching narrative of the trials of African-Americans as a whole, as well as the trying covenant relationship between God and the Hebrew people. The three-fold cycle of the Israelites being right with God, then turning away from God and suffering negative consequences (in the case of the Zechariah 3 context, exile), followed by a return to God and the promise of prosperity, in some ways parallels the plight of the sinner who continually turns away from God only to be brought back from the brink of destruction (sin and death). It is therefore not surprising that Foote continuously refers to herself as "a brand plucked from the burning," referencing this narrative; God continually intercedes and saves her, not once, but at each moment (in the verb-language of Gal. 2.20 and 2. Cor. 6.2—now, and now, and now).

As we have seen, Foote deploys the image of a "brand plucked from the burning" at moments of peril (physical or spiritual), temptation, and salvation from sin. Yet the power of this trope does not lie only with its more obvious metaphoric implications (a brand in the fire that eventually emerges unscathed). In fact, looking again at the context of Zech. 3.2, we can see a more specific link to sanctification, one that reminds us of Foote's overarching project—leading her readers to "believe" and "enter into...sweet soul rest" (163), the kind of rest that only freedom from the guilt of sin can bring. The connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament is important, here: the "old" model of the Israelites crying out to God to save them and bring them back into grace when they fall away is replaced by a "new" model of sanctification as perpetual grace ("now and now") through which Christ gives the believer the continual strength to resist sin—there's no need to ever fall away.

When Foote gets down to the business of explaining sanctification in more detail, she discusses the importance of the priest's office in the Old Testament, reminding her readers that the priest was “to stand between God and the people” (231). In order to do this, the priests had to “sanctify themselves” (Foote references Leviticus 22.2, part of the Old Testament priestly restrictions meant to ensure the holiness of the priests serving in the Temple). According to Webster’s 1877 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, sanctification means “to make sacred or holy; to set apart to a holy or religious use; to consecrate by appropriate rites” (“Sanctify,” def. 1), and Foote makes a clear connection between the priestly office of the Old Testament and the doctrine of sanctification in the New Testament. In both instances, God is a “holy God” and should “be worshiped in the beauty of holiness by all those who come into his presence” (231). The precise manner of holiness worship has changed, but the principle has not. Moreover, to invoke the need for such holiness in the present, Foote goes so far as to use the vocative: “Oh, that God may baptize the ministry and church with the Holy Ghost and with fire” (231).

Although Foote seems to be referencing Pentecost and the advent of the Holy Spirit through tongues of fire in this vocative quotation (Acts 2.1-4), she secondarily allows for resonance between the title of her autotheography and its priestly implications. Examining the rest of Zechariah chapter 3, we find that an angel arranges for Joshua's "filthy clothes" to be taken off, and he is clothed, instead, in clean "festal apparel" (essentially priestly garments—Zech. 3.4). Significantly, having disrobed Joshua and put him in proper priestly garments, the angel gives Joshua a message from "the Lord of hosts," saying, "I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day" (Zech. 3.9). God

removes Joshua's (and symbolically all of Israel's) sin on a special day, a day that becomes "the day of the Lord" by the end of the book of Zechariah (Zech. 14). In essence, guilt and sin will no longer stand between the Israelites and God (or, by the end of Zechariah, between "any of the families of the earth" and God, Zech. 14.17).

Of course, in the New Testament, Jesus is the figure who stands between the people and God, not Joshua. Christians often read parts of the Old Testament, such as the end of Zechariah, as a pre-figuring of Christ. The "king over all the earth" (Zech. 14.9) is Jesus, and he becomes the one who can say, "I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day." In this way, he is also the one who plucks the brand from the fire. Combining a reading of Foote's sanctification framework in her preface and the last chapter of her autotheography with the Old Testament imagery of her title and epigraph, it becomes clear that Foote's prose operates on multiple levels. Her repetition of the idea that she is a "brand plucked from the burning" coupled with her use of progressive verb structures (now and now and now) create her textual method, one that continually reminds her reader of God's intervention (being plucked from the burning seven times) and the need for the individual believer to participate in the process of sanctification, a process she demonstrates through incidents in her narrative. Only after demonstrating the give-and-take relationship between herself and God on her own journey through salvation and sanctification is Foote ready to formally call the reader to sanctification. Foote's life story is an object lesson for the reader, but her direct, theological sermonizing is most salient toward the end of her book when she ceases to narrate incidents from her own life.

### **The Call to Sanctification**

Foote presents her most concise, cogent argument for sanctification in the form of a hymn in the last chapter of her autotheography. The refrain (chorus) of her hymn is as follows:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lamb  
Holy is the Lamb of God,  
Whose blood doth make me clean. (233)

The primary theological import of this refrain reminds the reader (a potential singer and therefore participant in her text) of Christ's holiness, the sacrifice that the "Lamb of God" made in shedding his blood to cleanse the believer of sin. By choosing to explain the doctrine of sanctification in both prose form (throughout her text) and hymn form (in the last chapter), Foote creates a culture of accessibility and orality for various readers of her text.

We have already discussed Methodism's oral culture in terms of the itinerant preacher's performance, but it is important to keep in mind that such orality was also participatory and communal, and hymn-singing played a crucial role. In *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism*, Sandra S. Sizer points out that the hymn is a linguistic form that specifically combines content and lyricism in a way that can "provide a technique for participation" through "ritual performances" (10, 16). Hymn-singing was a Methodist mode of conversion, a way to transmit the gospel message and bolster the believer's faith in an accessible, memorable form (Hempton 68). In fact, "in Wesley's words, poetry was to be 'the handmaid of piety' in quickening devotion, confirming faith, enlivening hope, and kindling or increasing the Christian's love of God and humankind" (Hempton 69). Growing up in a culture of revival (the "burned-over district") and having parents who attended a Methodist church



and sung hymns to her, it isn't surprising that Foote began to use hymns as teaching tools. She references snippets of at least fourteen different hymns in her autotheography, usually set apart from the body of her own text. In essence, this kind of hymnody becomes an epistemological system, a mode of discourse Foote exploits to transmit the gospel more easily, since "hymns redact the gospel narrative and draw the believer into that narrative" (Hempton 73).

The first hymn reference in Foote's text occurs in the context of family worship, a more intimate worship time often led by the father of the household involving prayer, singing, and meditation on scripture. This practice was important to the transmission of Methodism across generations. A. Gregory Schneider discusses Methodism as a social religion rooted in a specific concept of the "family of God," a family that helped to "confer a general sense of God's calling on each individual who learned to tell his or her story according to the way of the cross" (120). Schneider notes that one specific ritual, family prayer, was important in imparting this call to the "rising generation" (141), and Foote specifically describes her memories of her father's role in imparting the gospel through song during such family worship. In fact, the very first thing she mentions about her family's worship is the memory of hearing her father's voice as he sang, "Lord, in the morning thou shalt hear / My voice ascending high" (169). Significantly, the lyrics of this Isaac Watts hymn subtly discuss the holiness of God and the importance of Christ as intercessor. The quatrain just before the words "Thou art a God before whose sight / The wicked shall not stand" reads:

Up to the hills where Christ is gone,  
To plead for all his saints,  
Presenting, at the Father's throne,  
Our songs and our complaints. (Watts 98)

One of Foote's first religious memories is that of hearing her father sing a hymn that instills a "holy fear" in her, one that seems to have helped to convince her that her human wickedness demanded the righteousness of Christ. Her earthly father teaches her to take her concerns to Christ, who will transmit them to the heavenly Father.

Douglass-Chin rightly observes that Foote's conversion experience and desire to learn to read are both directly linked to this early scene of family worship with her father. Foote describes two events, one right after the other: first, she explains that a white woman taught her the Lord's prayer ("Our Father, which art in heaven..."), and secondly, she describes her father's hymn-singing in family worship. The only sentence that stands between these two occurrences accounts for Foote's first stirrings of conversion: "It has always seemed to me that I was converted at this time" (169). In Douglass-Chin's reading, "the [Lord's] prayer to her heavenly Father gives way to the image of black family worship and an actual citation of song led by her beloved black father on earth" (131). The kinds of knowledge presented by a white woman and Foote's black father collide, together creating the impetus for an eight-year-old Foote to become literate so she can read the Bible. In effect, oral and written cultures merge at this textual moment.

Douglass-Chin makes a crucial point about Foote's ability to combine orality and written work, claiming that her "extensive use of song" makes a unique contribution to this genre of spiritual autobiography: "her adoption of African American sermonic techniques turns her readership into a congregation with whom she maintains an ongoing sermonic call-and-response dialogue throughout the text" (128). As Douglass-Chin notes, Foote's last chapters are, in fact, sermons, and she ends her book with a hymn of her own.

Using these insights, both the “sermonic text” and an “extensive use of song” require the reader’s active participation in his/her own conversion.

By the end of Foote’s autotheography, however, the concept of hymnody contributing to conversion is not a new one, as “the song” has already become the “trope representing salvation” in Foote’s own conversion experience (Douglass-Chin 132). Upon hearing a minister preach from Revelations 14.3, “And they sung as it were a new song before the throne,” Foote finds herself asking whether or not she, a sinner, could ever sing that new song (Foote 180). This line of questioning leads directly to her conversion, during which, like the biblical Paul (née Saul), “a ray of light flashed across [her] eyes, accompanied by a sound of far distant singing” and she found herself able to sing that new song: “Redeemed! redeemed! glory! glory!” (180). The distant singing of heavenly choirs punctuates Foote’s conversion, creating the conditions for Foote’s own song in her text—a hymn of holiness she imparts to her community of participatory readers.

I will now return to the hymn in the last chapter of Foote’s book to analyze the metaphors and interpretive strategies she uses therein to “articulate a structure of the world and simultaneously create a community” (Sizer 18-19). By making use of metaphoric pairs in the hymn, Foote can negotiate traditional negative/positive binaries in a first person, “I” voice (Sizer 25), only to implicate the reader in her vocative call in the last stanza:

Oh, come to Jesus now, and drink  
Of that holy, living stream;  
Your thirst he’ll quench, your soul revive,  
And cleanse you from all sin. (233)

The "mixture of joy and sorrow" that the speaker experiences in the first line of this hymn and then within each stanza ("exalted" vs. "doubting," praying as a "task" vs. as a "blessing," finding the Bible a "sealed book" or "a blessing / Wherever I do look") ends up being covered by Jesus' blood (penultimate stanza), cleansed in that "living stream" (final stanza). Only sanctification can create the conditions for salvation, rendering the binaries of joy and sorrow obsolete. Extending this dissolution of binaries to those previously discussed in Galatians 3.28, even hierarchical binaries like male/female and black/white are potentially destabilized, here, breaking down in Christ's "holy, living stream."

Foote's social gospel works precisely because it is fragmentary, progressing bit by bit, dissolving or reappropriating binaries metaphorically—one tenor, vehicle, or verb tense at a time. Foote draws the reader into a textual space where conventional binaries become astonishing because they exist in a metaphoric relation that is changed by grace. At the close of her text, Foote can more forcefully call her readers to faith because she has demonstrated the liberating power of sanctification as method and metaphor. Foote makes 2 Corinthians 6.2, "Now is the day of salvation," come to life as she implores, "Why not yield, believe, and be sanctified now—now, while reading?" She even facilitates the conversion process, giving her readers the very words to say: " 'Here, Lord, I will, I do believe; thou hast said now—now let it be—now apply the blood of Jesus to my waiting, longing soul' " (234).

In Foote's eyes, sanctification, or "Christian perfection," involves "an extinction of every temper contrary to love" (232). Once the blood of Jesus "meets all the demands of the law" (228), even color and gender prejudice can be overcome as the "Gospel flail"

is "lifted up in a kind and loving spirit" (223). Foote turns a negative image from slavery (whipping) into an opportunity to be crucified with Christ and have "full and free salvation" (223). Her version of a social gospel becomes a preaching process across her text as she creates a "network of believers beyond any one place" by relating her own "dramatic...vivid experience of grace," displaying her "gift for making people feel God's presence and forgiveness" (Mathews 20, 21). By drawing her readers into her text, laced with the gospel narrative itself, Foote can call her readers to faith "now" (234).

In addition to this direct facilitation, Foote guides the reader's conversion in one final, metaphoric way: she establishes the framework through which the reader can also become a "brand plucked from the fire." Invoking Mount Pisgah in the second verse of her hymn, Foote again allows an Old Testament narrative to inform her presentation of the New Testament concept of sanctification in Christ. "Mount Pisgah" and "Mount Nebo" are often used interchangeably in the Bible;<sup>20</sup> in the Old Testament, Pisgah/Nebo is the peak from which Moses can look across the Transjordan to the "promised land," but, having disobeyed one of God's instructions, he is forbidden from actually taking the Hebrew people into that land. Instead, Joshua (who is called the "high priest" in Zechariah 3.2) is appointed to lead the people into the promised land. In a sense, Foote compares herself to Joshua by calling herself a "brand plucked from the fire" and later alluding to Pisgah/Nebo; she becomes the figure that negotiates a liminal event for her community of readers (from unbelief to belief or conversion to sanctification), just as Joshua became the figure who maintained the Lord's covenant promises as the Hebrew people left their forty-year wilderness wanderings for the "promised land."

---

<sup>20</sup> See Numbers 21.20 and 23.14; Deuteronomy 3.27, 4.49, and 34.1.

As Mathews reminds us, Methodism was conducive to these kinds of liminal events, "*rituals through which persons move from one status to another*" (emphasis in original, 23). The only danger was that such liminality might become permanent, creating a "liminal people" through holiness and "interior knowledge of the Holy Spirit" (Mathews 24). After all, as Foote's case illustrates, such "interior knowledge" could lead to a liberating Christology where the "dramatic subversion of traditional hierarchies" was a real possibility (Hempton 140), a theological system that could readily make use of metaphors as identity-producing/confirming.<sup>21</sup> Foote constructs herself as a "brand plucked from the fire" who calls others to the liminal, sanctified status of brand-hood. As a charismatic textual leader, Foote joyfully writes herself into a sacred space where even the liminality of continuous verb progressions can become permanent in the "now" of certain salvation:

Hallelujah! 'tis done!  
I believe on the Son;  
I am saved by the blood  
Of the crucified One. (234)<sup>22</sup>

Throughout her life, Foote continued to stress the importance of sanctification as a doctrine that must not be neglected as a part of full salvation. In 1894, the same year that she "became the first woman in the A.M.E. Zion church to be ordained a deacon" (Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit* 10), Foote published a sermon entitled "Christian Perfection" in the *Star of Zion*. Through this sermon, Foote argues that perfection is a much-maligned and misunderstood creed that should be restored to the Wesleyan ideal of

---

<sup>21</sup> As Andrews explains in *To Tell a Free Story*, "metaphors are arguments. Their success depends greatly on the capacity of the reader to accept and explore the creative dialectic of the semantic clash until new meanings emerge from the debris of old presuppositions" (11). Foote uses tropes and metaphors--even those that seem conventional or self-explanatory--and "clashes" them together, allowing for the disruption of binaries and/or hierarchies.

<sup>22</sup> Foote uses the refrain of a Philip P. Bliss hymn, here. According to the *NetHymnal*, this hymn was published in *Gospel Songs* (Cincinnati, Ohio: John Church & Co., 1874).

“perfect love” (68). Foote also proclaims that she will continue preaching about perfection because the Bible makes it “mandatory” in Matthew 5.48: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (66-67). As usual, when it comes to her calling to preach, Foote is not deterred by the challenges that itinerant, unlicensed ministry presents: “We may be debarred entrance to many pulpits (as some of us now are) and stand at the door or on the street corner in order to preach to men and women. No difference when or where, we must preach a whole gospel” (66).

As her final published sermon suggests, Foote dedicated her life to preaching a “whole gospel” that emphasized the theological and practical necessity of sanctification. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Foote believed that the Bible was still relevant in its entirety:

I know it is said [that] the gospel is not adapted to the nineteenth century; men are different now from what they were. Yes, they may be different externally but essentially they are the same. What man was, man is; what man needed he needs still... Our work is not to make the truths of the Bible fit into all the crooks and crevices of the lives and beliefs of men. We are to stamp, not overlay; to coin, not gild. (“Christian Perfection” 66)

Through her autotheography, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, and her sermons, both oral and textual, Foote made her mark on the nineteenth century as God’s brand, “stamping” her readers and listeners with biblical truth. With the heart and skills of a minister, Foote answered the call set forth in Colossians 1.28, a verse that she herself used to confirm “the duty of a true preacher”: “ ‘Warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus’ ” (“Christian Perfection” 66).

## Works Cited

- Allen, Richard. *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States. Written by Himself.* Philadelphia, 1833. *Documenting the American South.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2000. Web. 23 July 2010.
- Andrews, William L. "The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative." *PMLA* 105.1 (1990): 23-34. *JSTOR.* Web. 26 July 2010.
- . "The Politics of African-American Ministerial Autobiography from Reconstruction to the 1920s." *African-American Christianity: Essays in History.* Ed. Paul E. Johnson. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994. 111-133. Print.
- , ed. Introduction. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. Print.
- . *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865.* Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1986. Print.
- Bliss, Philip P. "Hallelujah, 'Tis Done." *NetHymnal.* NetHymnal 11 Aug. 2007. Web. 23 July 2010.
- Brown, Elsa Barkley. "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom." *Public Culture* 7.1 (1994): 107-146. Print.
- Coleman, Will. "'Coming through 'Ligion': Metaphor in Non-Christian and Christian Experiences with the Spirit(s) in African American Slave Narratives." *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative.* 2nd ed. Ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003. 47-71. Print.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye. *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. Print.
- . *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion.* New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Coogan, Michael D., et al, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.* 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.



- Cross, Whitney. *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*. 1950. New York: Harper and Row, 1965. Print.
- Dieter, Melvin Easterday. *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1980. Print.
- Dodson, Jualynne E. *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church*. New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2002. Print.
- Doty, Thos. K. Introduction. *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*. 1879. Julia A. J. Foote. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 164-165. Print.
- Douglass-Chin, Richard J. *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001. Print.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America*. 1935. New York: Russell and Russell, 1968. Print.
- Finkenbine, Roy E. "Boston's Black Churches: Institutional Centers of the Antislavery Movement." *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston*. Ed. Donald M. Jacobs. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. 169-189. Print.
- Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988. Print.
- Foote, Julia A. J. *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*. 1879. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 161-234. Print.
- . "Christian Perfection." 1894. *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*. Ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. 66-68. Print.
- Gilmore, Glenda Elizabeth. *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996. Print.
- Glaude, Jr., Eddie S. *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. Print.

- Grammer, Elizabeth Elkin. *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Hardesty, Nancy A. *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*. 1984. 2nd ed. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1999. Print.
- Hattersley, Roy. *John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning*. London: Little, Brown, 2002. Print.
- Hempton, David. *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2005. Print.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- Hopkins, Dwight N. "Slave Theology in the 'Invisible Institution'." *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative*. 2nd ed. Ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003. 1-32. Print.
- James, Jennifer Lee. "Jehiel C. Beman: A Leader of the Northern Free Black Community." *The Journal of Negro History* 82.1 (1997): 133-157. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 June 2008.
- Jelinek, Estelle C., ed. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980. Print.
- Jones, Charles Edwin. *Black Holiness; A Guide to the Study of Black Participation in Wesleyan Perfectionist and Glossolalic Pentecostal Movements*. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1987. Print.
- Jones, Martha S. *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007. Print.
- Lee, Jarena. *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*. 1836. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 25-48. Print.
- Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke UP, 1990. Print.
- Lobody, Diane H. " 'That Language Might Be Given Me': Women's Experience in Early Methodism." *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*. Ed. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993. 127-144. Print.

- Mathews, Donald G. "Evangelical America—The Methodist Ideology." *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*. Ed. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993. 17-30. Print.
- McKay, Nellie Y. "Nineteenth-century Black Women's Spiritual Autobiographies: Religious Faith and Self-Empowerment." *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*. Ed. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993. 178-191. Print.
- Moody, Joycelyn. *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001. Print.
- Newman, Richard S. *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*. New York: New York UP, 2008. Print.
- Peterson, Carla L. *"Doers of the Word": African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.
- Pierce, Yolanda. *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2005. Print.
- Raser, Harold E. *Phoebe Palmer, Her Life and Thought*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987. Print.
- "Sanctify." Def. 1. *An American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster; Thoroughly Revised and Greatly Enlarged and Improved, by Chauncey A. Goodrich and Noah Porter*. 1877. Print.
- Schneider, A. Gregory. *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- Sizer, Sandra S. *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1978. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. Print.
- . Introduction. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998. 3-52. Print.
- Stanley, Susie C. *Holy Boldness: Women Preachers' Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2002. Print.
- Walters, Alexander. *My Life and Work*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1917. *Documenting the American South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1999. Web. 23 July 2010.

Watts, Isaac. "Lord, in the Morning Thou Shalt Hear." *Hymnal of the Methodist Episcopal Church, With Tunes*. Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe; New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1878. Hymn 98. Print.

Wesley, John. "Christian Perfection." *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2 (Sermons II, 34-70). Ed. Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985. 99-121. Print.

White, Shane and Graham White. "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *The Journal of Southern History* 61.1 (1995): 45-76. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 June 2008.

## CHAPTER 3

### “Aleaving the World, the Flesh, and the Devil”: Holiness, Celibacy, and Separation from “the World” in Rebecca Cox Jackson’s Autobiographical Writings

*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*

—Romans 8.12-13 (NRSV)<sup>1</sup>

According to her autobiographical writings, Rebecca Cox Jackson experienced salvation from sin through the power of God’s mercy in 1830 at the age of 35.<sup>2</sup> A few months later, in January, 1831, she received the blessing of sanctification, a second work of the Holy Spirit during which her “burden rolled off” and she was freed from the burden of deliberate sin (76).<sup>3</sup> With her Methodist background—Jackson notes that she “received the religion of the Methodist persuasion in [her] childhood,” and her mother belonged to a Methodist prayer meeting (167, 133)—she would have been familiar with sanctification as an experience through which the believer is consecrated to God, set apart from sin to lead a life of holiness in the Spirit. Thus far, Jackson’s story is consistent with

---

<sup>1</sup> This biblical quotation is taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 3rd ed. All other biblical citations in this chapter are taken from *The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*, with the exception of references already quoted within the primary text.

<sup>2</sup> All references to Jackson’s autobiographical writings are taken from *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, edited by Jean McMahon Humez (1981).

<sup>3</sup> “Burden rolled off”: Jackson may have been conversant with the language of John Bunyan’s popular *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). The “burden” of the pilgrim is removed at the foot of the cross (Bunyan 37).

conversion experiences described by her contemporaries in similar autobiographical narratives. Jackson's account of her sanctification experience is unique, however, because it includes an additional spiritual awakening: she felt God convicting her to lead a holy life through celibacy (76, 87). Upon receiving sanctification, Jackson has a great insight: "I then saw for the first time what the sin of the fall of man was, and I thought if I had all the earth, I would give it, to be a single woman. How to return home to my husband again I knowed not. These were my new thoughts, for it had never entered into my mind that was the sin" (76-77). This visionary insight forever changes the path of Jackson's life, triggering a chain of events that will include leaving behind her husband, her brother, and "the world, the flesh, and the devil" as well as leading to a ten-year itinerant holiness ministry on the Eastern seaboard and later to calling her own people—other African-Americans—to a life of complete holiness in the Shaker religion (142).

More importantly in terms of autobiographical expression, Jackson's vision of the "sin of the fall of man" seems to alter the path of her narration, since her prose is infused with Shakerism from this point on in her text. Although she explains that she does not visit the Shakers until 1836 and does not have extensive contact with them until 1842, Jackson's Shaker lens is noticeable even toward the chronological beginning of her writings where she narrates past events and describes important visions and dreams in a retrospective manner. Later her text seems to be organized by date in a diary-like fashion and increasingly incorporates Shaker theology and detailed apologies alongside accounts of her visionary experiences. Indeed, there is a veneer of Shaker thought that coats most of Jackson's writing, a layer of phraseology, metaphor, and theological structure that, in a sense, colors her spiritual vision and tints her memory. Even though Jackson carefully

maintains that her understanding of the importance of celibacy in holy living comes directly from God—for example, the idea of original sin having a sexual component was “new” to her (77)—on this point, as with other tenets represented by Jackson as coming to her through divine revelation rather than human means, the reader may be a bit suspicious that Jackson’s later understandings of Shaker doctrine are infusing her construction of her pre-Shaker self.<sup>4</sup> The Jackson who composed her autobiography was already a highly skilled Shaker hermeneutist; this older Jackson is clearly present in her recounting of the experiences of her younger self.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Jackson’s tendency to view her life through a Shaker lens, however, she takes great pains to demonstrate her spiritual uniqueness, emphasizing her mystical abilities and distinguishing her particular religious beliefs from the communities around her, whether black Methodists in her hometown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or white Shakers in Watervliet, New York. Her distinctive interpretations of the Bible and Shaker thought, coupled with descriptions of her dreams, visions, and trances, allow readers to

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Jean McMahon Humez, editor of *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (1981), the “Shakerized perspective” evident across Jackson’s writings can most likely be attributed to their time of composition (67). Jackson may have composed the first (more narrative) portion of her autobiographical writings in the mid-1840s and probably drew on earlier journals to produce additional writing in the mid-1850s (68). Therefore, it is problematic to think of Jackson’s “autobiography” as a distinct, uniform text. Although I will continue to refer to Jackson’s work as a single entity in this chapter, it is important to keep in mind that Humez’s edition of Jackson’s autobiographical writings actually collates numerous documents into one source. According to Humez’s “A Note on the Text,” two different manuscripts are extant in Jackson’s own hand, one of which “is a version of the incomplete autobiography” that abruptly ends in the middle of an entry dated April 8, 1843, and another that is “a short booklet containing several of Rebecca Perot’s accounts of dreams, as dictated to Jackson, along with a few of Jackson’s own” (65-66). The final document is a “complete, rough-draft anthology produced by [Alonzo G.] Hollister,” a Shaker editor who visited Jackson’s Philadelphia Shaker family a few years after her death in 1871 and worked with Jackson’s close friend and successor, Rebecca Perot, to collect Jackson’s writings and form them into a single anthology. For a detailed discussion of the textual relationship between Jackson’s autobiographical writings and Hollister’s spiritual narrative (“Reminiscences”), see Madden, “Reading, Writing, Race, and Mother Imagery: The Literacies of Rebecca Cox Jackson and Alonzo Giles Hollister” (93-123).

<sup>5</sup> This distinction between the “older” and “younger” Jackson can also be referred to as the difference between the *narrating* “I”—“the ‘I’ available to readers,” the voice of the reflective first-person storyteller—and the *narrated* “I”—“the object ‘I,’ the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating ‘I’ chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader” (Smith and Watson 59-60).

see how religious charisma can be effectively channeled into an autobiographical text.<sup>6</sup> Across her writings, we see Jackson's efforts to maintain this experiential religious connection; she works diligently to keep her spiritual senses attuned to the divine and to nurture the divine in others. Through periods of intense prayer, fasting, confession, and witnessing, Jackson rigorously disciplines her body and mind, allowing her to hear God's voice like an Old Testament prophet, see dazzling visions of angels, and be a divine instrument: "I am only a pen in His hand. Oh, that I may prove faithful to the end" (107).

By claiming to be God's writing instrument, Jackson suggests that her "I" voice, the self she presents in her writings, is really a conduit for divine authorship. The slippage between mouthpiece and message is important: Jackson sidesteps her own authorial agency and the possibility of mediating (and perhaps amending) God's message through her acts of writing. By presenting herself as a divine writing tool, Jackson blurs the line between inspiration and transcription. (In her own mind, did God *inspire* her writings, or *dictate* what she should write?) Whether or not this blurring is a conscious decision on Jackson's part, the effect is the same: God plays a tremendous part in her narrative.

As with other personal narratives by African-American women who felt God calling them to preach holiness and pen theological treatises, the term *auto/theo/graphy* (self/God/writing) may be more appropriate for Jackson's work than the umbrella genre "spiritual autobiography." *Autotheography* encourages us to pay close attention to the relationship between the narrating "I" voice—Jackson's "self" as speaking subject—and the voice of God speaking to her, with her, and through her. It also helps to account for

---

<sup>6</sup> For more on a Weberian understanding of charisma and its institutionalization, see Jon Miller's *The Social Control of Religious Zeal* (78-82) and Stephen J. Stein's *The Shaker Experience in America* (66).



the many kinds of writing Jackson incorporates in her work; indeed, her narrative modes, verb tenses, and settings are not always stable. Because Jackson relies on her spiritual senses rather than her physical ones to reflect on the world around her, the line between dreaming and waking, “real” and surreal, becomes imperceptible in her text and in her own mind: “it seemed that nothing was hid from my spirit eye, neither by night nor day, neither when I was asleep nor awake” (184).

This chapter will examine the narrative action of Jackson’s “spirit eye,” her ability to distinguish between the things of the world around her that she observes with her physical eyes and spiritual things seen through the eyes of faith. Jackson uses her “spirit eye” to discern God’s will while putting forth her own story as a convert to full holiness living, adopter of Shakerism, and purveyor of Shaker theology as a writer and Shaker eldress. In fact, throughout her autobiographical writings, Jackson’s spiritual senses guide her own intimate relationship with the divine while also leading her to reach out to the unredeemed “world.”

Yet even as Jackson reached out, her intense personality and strong holiness convictions sometimes strained her relationships with family and community members. In order to understand Jackson’s initial separation from her life in Philadelphia, I will begin by analyzing her spiritual birth and call to celibacy, followed by a discussion of her resulting theological (and eventually physical) move from Methodism to Shakerism and how that shift affected her ability to minister to others. For Jackson, following God’s instruction led to a Christology of holy abstinence that became an open challenge to the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in terms of organizational hierarchies, marriage practices, and the Methodist doctrine of sanctification. Next, I will discuss the

ways in which Jackson’s orientation toward and deployment of the expression “the world” shifts across her text. Though attracted to the Shakers (who deliberately separated themselves from the non-Shaker “world”), Jackson is unable to completely leave “the world” behind, since that world contains other African-Americans who are in need of spiritual help—especially other black women. Finally, I will close with a brief discussion of Jackson’s Shaker family in Philadelphia and the possibilities (and limitations) of communal subjectivity for her.

Before launching into a detailed discussion of Jackson’s autotheography, however, an important question must be answered: Why might Shakerism have appealed to Jackson in the first place?

### **The Shakers: A People Called Out of “the World”**

*And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

—Romans 12.2

At its height in the mid-nineteenth century, the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, or “Shakers”—so termed by outsiders because of their ecstatic, physical brand of worship, including shouting, dancing, trembling, trances, and other forms of “shaking” movements—were a Christian sect in the United States whose membership numbered in the thousands, spread across about twenty rural, segregated communities deliberately set apart from “the world” (the Shaker term for non-Shakers).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> For numbers and documentation of Shaker communities in the nineteenth century, see Bainbridge, “Shaker Demographics 1840-1900” (355), and Campbell “Women’s Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised—1810-1860” (28-29, n. 12).

The Shakers believed in communal living and, like the early Christians of the New Testament, held property in common. They also considered physical labor a worthy and worshipful experience, wore simple dress, practiced celibacy and separation of the sexes in terms of living quarters, and employed ritualized confession of sins as a method of maintaining community ties and furthering salvation.<sup>8</sup> The Shaker religion was experiential in nature; each individual was an integral part of the daily labors of the community, both physical and spiritual. As Priscilla Brewer explains, both men and women were important to each level of collective Shaker life:

Shaker "brethren" and "sisters" were "gathered" into "families in Christ," administrative units of thirty to one hundred members, each of which was governed by two "elders" and two "eldresses." "Families" were organized into communities, several of which made up a "bishopric," which was the charge of a "ministry" also composed of two "elders" and two "eldresses." ("Weaker Sex" 609)<sup>9</sup>

Rejecting procreation and sexual love expressed within heterosexual marriage, the Shakers organized their lives around a different kind of love. They believed in "nonsexual, affectionate, sibling love, the closest approximation on earth to the divine and unifying love of God and of the Christ Spirit" (Kitch 86). The distinction between sexual love and God's love is really a fundamental opposition between two categories: things earthly (carnal, fleshly, temporal, generative, of the sinful nature) and things divine (chaste, spiritual, transcendent, regenerative, of a new nature). This key concept in

---

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this chapter I will refer to Shakerism in the past tense, referencing Shaker practices, spirituality, and theologies from the nineteenth century. The Shaker religion is not extinct, however; a small community of Shakers continue to practice their faith at the Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in New Gloucester, Maine. In addition to Sabbathday Lake, a few other Shaker villages are open to visitors as tourist attractions and historical sites (*Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village*).

<sup>9</sup> Brewer's essay, "'Tho' of the Weaker Sex': A Reassessment of Gender Equality among the Shakers," goes on to point out numerous problems with the largely taken-for-granted scholarly position that the Shakers were egalitarian in their gender practices. She explains some important shifts in the demographics of Shaker communities that led to an increase in female economic and spiritual power during times of crisis and toward the end of the nineteenth century when male membership was declining.

Shaker theology was crucial to both eternal salvation and daily living. The most revolutionary insight of the Shaker faith system was the notion that humans could transcend the physical and temporal *while still on earth*. Believing that the second coming of Christ occurred in the person of Ann Lee (the founder of Shakerism who, after her death, came to be seen as the embodiment of Christ in a female form), the Shakers were a post-millennial Christian people who set out to establish a spiritual Zion on earth in America.

Guided by a vision she received while imprisoned in her English homeland after aggravating church and local authorities with her sectarian group's pious antics, Ann Lee, known to her disciples as "Mother Ann," emigrated to America in 1774 along with her husband and a small band of religious followers (so-called "Shaking Quakers").<sup>10</sup>

Although documentation regarding their theological lineage is spotty, the Shakers may have been influenced by radical early Quakers, or by the millennial beliefs and rapturous, frenzied worship styles of the "French Prophets," or even by the various itinerant preachers who visited their industrial hometown of Manchester, England, in the mid-eighteenth century, including Methodists such as the infamous George Whitefield (Stein 5-6).<sup>11</sup> Whatever the combination of influences, however, Shakerism emphasized a charismatic, experiential religion from its earliest inception.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Stein notes in *The Shaker Experience in America* that the "Shaking Quakers," a sectarian "small group of religious enthusiasts in Manchester led by James and Jane Wardley" of which Ann Lee was an important member during the early 1770s, often antagonized local officials, intentionally producing conflict (3-5). For instance, "they adopted a tactic employed earlier by Quaker prophets, invading the sanctuaries of congregations assembled for worship" (Stein 5).

<sup>11</sup> The term "French Prophets" was used by the English to denote those who "emigrated from France in the early years of the eighteenth century after Louis XIV vigorously suppressed a revolt by radical Protestants known as Camisards" (Stein 5). The early Shakers may have been influenced by these apocalyptic enthusiasts in their anticipation that the second coming of Christ was at hand (Whitson 6).

<sup>12</sup> In 1770, two events occurred that changed the face of religious fervor in the United States: George Whitefield, "the Grand Itinerant of the Great Awakening," passed away (Marini 11), and Ann Lee had a

The Shakers believed in continuing revelation that allowed for the primacy of encounters with the divine; that is, Shakers did not limit themselves to the Bible or biblical personages in matters of spiritual authority or guidance. Moreover, Shakers believed that the Bible was not a fixed text to be looked to in isolation. Benjamin S. Youngs, one of the authors of *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* who hailed from one of the Western Shaker colonies in Ohio, had this to say about the dangers of reifying the Bible without an experiential understanding of the Spirit of God or an understanding of continuing revelation: "By establishing the Scriptures as the word of God, for all future ages, the most inconsistent ideas have been formed of the Divine goodness; while the comments and precepts of men have prevailed, instead of the *living Word*; and a total ignorance of the spiritual world, instead of the knowledge of the true and quickening Spirit of revelation" (emphasis in original, qtd. in Whitson: 131). As the words of Youngs suggest, immediate, often visionary encounters with the "spiritual world" were ongoing and expected. In fact, the idea of *progression* is a keystone of Shaker thought: new visions, revelations, encounters with the divine, testimonies, and explanations of theology were not closed to any generation.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, any person could be subject to such spiritual encounters; they did not fall under the exclusive purview of male divines.

---

revelation, a vision in which she saw sexual intercourse as original sin. These events are linked: both leaders advocated a chosen people. Whitefield was a crucial figure in preparing the way for a gospel message like Ann Lee's to take hold in Revolutionary America. Amidst the religious foment at the end of the eighteenth century, Ann Lee arrived to spread her message in the revival chaos. Whitefield and other itinerants gave the framework for a chosen people, set apart and internally regulating, with an emphasis on true experiential religion through conversion.

<sup>13</sup> See Whitson's explanation of "progressive unfoldment" as part of "the Shaker Way" involving the concept of "traveling in the gospel" as related to the word "travail" (86-87). Gospel labor was hard work, and unfolded over time.

Rebecca Cox Jackson may have embraced the Shakers precisely because they encouraged new revelations and recognized spiritual “gifts” in men *and* women. Additionally, Jackson likely felt empowered by the female-affirming theology offered by the Shakers; her writings indicate that she valued what contemporary feminist theologians would call “gender-inclusive God imagery” (Mercadante 41). The Shakers believed in a dual Godhead, both Heavenly (or Eternal) Father and Holy Mother Wisdom. In Shaker thought, masculine and feminine aspects of divinity correspond with the redemption of humanity through male and female forms. Since Adam and Eve both sinned in the Garden of Eden, leading to the fall of humankind, redemption is enacted through both the Lamb and the Bride (that is, Jesus Christ and Ann Lee).<sup>14</sup> Jackson seems to have been attracted to the spiritual representative of Christ’s second coming to earth, “Mother Ann” Lee, precisely because Lee’s message and visionary experiences were so like her own. Both Lee and Jackson were mystics who believed that God spoke directly to them, calling them to celibate holiness and to proclaim a message of holiness to others, even in the face of significant opposition. In short, Shakerism gave Jackson a framework for her difficult spiritual and temporal choices: leaving her husband and the “world” of Philadelphia for a life of itinerant preaching, separating from the unchaste, unredeemed “world” by living in a Shaker community at Watervliet, New York, and finally becoming the eldress of her own Shaker family—bringing her “worlds” together in her version of God’s kingdom on earth.

### **Jackson’s Spiritual Birth, Sanctification, and Vision for “the World”**

---

<sup>14</sup> Jackson refers to “four Persons...now made manifest, which are God the Father and God the Mother who created Adam and Eve in their own likeness, and the Lamb and the Bride (Rev. 19:7)” (142).

Jackson's autobiographical writings open in July, 1830, not with the details of her birth and parentage, but rather with her spiritual birth at age 35. Because Jackson did not participate in the editing and publication of her autotheography—her autobiographical writings were first collected by a Shaker editor after her death and later published together for the first time in a critical edition edited by Jean McMahon Humez in 1981—we will never know if she might have added additional biographical details to the beginning of her manuscript(s) before going to press. We can glean some important details about Jackson's pre-conversion life from other moments in her writings, however.<sup>15</sup>

Rebecca Cox was born near Philadelphia to free parents in 1795 and lived with her grandmother as a small child. No information is known about her father, who may have died approximately when she was born; her mother later remarried (possibly twice) and seems to have struggled to support her family, particularly during times when she was single and after the death of the grandmother. Like many other black women in antebellum northern cities, Jackson's mother probably worked outside the home, making it necessary for a ten-year-old Jackson to care for her younger sister and brother each day; consequently, Jackson did not attend school (she describes herself as “the only child of my mother that had not learning,” 107). After her mother's death in 1808, Jackson most likely went to live with her much older brother, Joseph Cox.

Sometime between 1808 and 1830, the year her narrative begins, Rebecca Cox married Samuel Jackson. Although she makes the conflict between herself and her

---

<sup>15</sup> I rely heavily on Humez's introduction to *Gifts of Power* for this biographical sketch of Jackson's early life. See her introduction for additional biographical details and the context of antebellum Philadelphia around the time of Jackson's first conversion experience in 1830 (10-15). For a more current overview of the historical context of antebellum Philadelphia, see Dunbar's *A Fragile Freedom* (2008).

husband a central part of her writings about her life immediately following her sanctification and call to a celibate holy life, Jackson never recounts the circumstances of their courtship or the date of their marriage. Jackson does make a point of mentioning her numerous domestic and childcare duties—she and Samuel lived in her brother’s household, and she was responsible for the care of her husband, her widower brother, and her brother’s six children in turn—but she never refers to any biological children of her own, so it is likely that she and Samuel had none (107).

Before her conversion, sanctification, and call to celibacy, Jackson seems to have lived a relatively comfortable life: she was a free black woman living in a city with “America’s largest northern urban black population” (Lapsansky 96); she earned money as a seamstress, shared economic responsibilities with two other adults in the household, and lived in her brother’s house (which had at least two floors and a cellar); her brother was an important figure at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church nearby, giving her potential access to the resources of one of the largest and most important black institutions in the city; and though it must have been challenging to care for her nieces and nephews, at least she did not have to work as a domestic in the home of a white family. Though she may have had certain material advantages in the physical world, however, she presents herself as having a tumultuous inner life.

Jackson’s interior world was a place of wonders and horrors, marvelous premonitions and violent encounters, sumptuous fruits and dangerous storms. Her autobiographical writings detail this world of visions and dreams in remarkable ways, carefully illustrating how her choice to listen to God alone and follow divine inner instruction led to many spiritual “gifts” with tangible consequences, including the gift of



literacy in her mid-thirties. This gift allowed Jackson to eventually write about her most important beliefs and religious pursuits. Although Jackson's writings bring her spiritual world into sharp relief, she does not give her readers a complete picture of her life in the physical world of antebellum Philadelphia. As described above, readers can glimpse her domestic life, employment, and engagement with the African-American community around her from the few biographical particulars that are mentioned in her writings, but Jackson never interrupts her prose for an overview of pertinent personal and social details. Like many spiritual autobiographers, Jackson's autobiographical writings give us more vivid impressions of her spiritual journey than of her childhood, material surroundings, or familial life events. However, Jackson's writings are more difficult to approach than most. Unlike Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and other nineteenth-century black women who penned autobiographies about their conversion experiences, itinerant evangelism, and theologies, Jackson does not begin her writings with the standard phrase "I was born..." Instead of beginning with her birth to free parents in 1795, Jackson's autobiographical writings open dramatically in 1830, plunging the reader into a fierce thunderstorm that turns out to be the setting of her first spiritual awakening.

By foregrounding her spiritual birth rather than her physical birth and parentage, Jackson steps outside the narrative formula that signals the beginning of a "true" narrative authored by an individual who actually lived and who personally experienced the events described in the ensuing autobiography. Authenticity was essential for nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographers; after all, testifying to the truth of God's presence and power in the narrator's own life was meant to convince readers that God could work in their lives, too. By beginning with "I was born," however, many

nineteenth-century spiritual narrators invoked one of the most important conventions of another autobiographical form of the period, a form that was very popular during the years coinciding with Jackson's post-conversion adulthood: the antebellum slave narrative.<sup>16</sup> The phrase "I was born" confirmed the very existence and personhood of the ex-slave narrator even as it drew attention to the dehumanizing aspects of slavery. For example, like Frederick Douglass, the narrator might be denied even the basic knowledge of the year of his birth because no records were kept, or he might suspect that his father was, in fact, also his master (Douglass 17-18). The central purpose of the slave narrative was to convince its readers that slavery must be abolished. To that end, the veracity of the ex-slave narrator was of the utmost importance. As James Olney explains, any perception of embellishment could jeopardize the antislavery cause:

To give a true picture of slavery as it really is, [the writer of a slave narrative] must maintain that he exercises a clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty—indeed, if it were creative it would be *eo ipso* faulty for "creative" would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for "lying." Thus the ex-slave narrator is debarred from use of a memory that would make anything of his narrative beyond or other than the purely, merely episodic, and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his venture, to the configurational dimension of narrative. (48)

In Olney's assessment, the constraints that bind ex-slave narrators help us to understand why slave narratives have a number of formulaic elements, leading to remarkable similarities across such narratives in terms of plot points, events, and descriptions—brutal whippings, the struggle to achieve literacy, the slave auction, escape attempts, and so on (46, 50-51). Paradoxically, the ex-slave became an "I"/eye witness narrator in order to

---

<sup>16</sup> According to Frances Smith Foster, the thirty-four years between 1831 and 1865 were "the golden age of the slave narrative" (61). Jackson's initial conversion experience occurred in 1830, and she died in 1871. For more on the popularity of slave narratives, see Sidonie Smith, *Where I'm Bound* (6-7), and Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery* (20-23).

show that his story was not in the least unique. The terrible episodes enumerated by each narrator had also been experienced by countless other enslaved persons.

Jackson's autobiographical writings prioritize a different kind of "I"/eye witness, that of the "spirit eye." The phenomena and phantasms she witnesses in the spirit world do not always have a counterpart in the physical world, yet her physical senses contribute to her spiritual awareness. Jackson is very attentive to the interaction between her body's eyesight and her spiritual vision, and often blends the two in her prose. Sometimes she simply sees a parallel between these two kinds of vision. For example, when a minister who had previously spoken against her message of celibate holiness later invited her to speak to his own congregation in order to discredit her and accuse her of preaching a "false doctrine," Jackson noted: "And while he was adoining all this, his heart, his design, and all his intention was as naked before my spirit eye as his face was to my natural eye" (149, 152). At other times, Jackson's vision takes the form of foresight or divine influence, and she remarks on her circumstances with full knowledge of effects of sacred vision: "But this was the Lord's doing, and it was new and marvelous in my eyes—yea, in my spiritual eye, for all these things I saw with my spirit eye" (136).<sup>17</sup> There are also moments in Jackson's writings where a fluid interaction between her "natural eye" and her "spirit eye" makes it hard for her reader to determine which type of vision she is privileging. Case in point: one of the many instances of a divine female figure giving her instruction, Jackson says of one of her visions, "She looked at me, as though she was ashowing me my place...she was inviting and pointing me to my work, for all the time she looked me steadily in the face. And I see the vision yet even now while I am awriting it, February the 4th, 1855" (255). By collapsing her present moment of writing and the

---

<sup>17</sup> Jackson references Psalm 118.23: "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes."

then-present (now past) moment of her initial vision, Jackson calls attention to her narrative acts of sight.

Drawing on narrative theory, it is helpful to think about Jackson's autobiographical "I" voice like a first-person narrator in a fictional work. More precisely, Jackson is a *focalizer* recounting her experiences through her distinct point of view. The term "focalization" puts particular emphasis on the visual, "the relation between 'who perceives' and what is perceived, [coloring] the story with subjectivity" (Bal 8). Since Jackson's subjectivity is often overwhelmed by the divine, and because Jackson repeatedly conflates past memories with present acts of vision during the act of writing, we can think of her as a spiritual focalizer who compels her readers to see through her "spirit eye." Indeed, as an extreme example, Jackson's spirit sometimes leaves her body and she is able to look down on her physical form or travel to faraway places. At one point, Jackson comments on what I would call an unambiguous moment of spiritual focalization: "All my senses and feeling and understanding was in my spirit. I found my body was no more than a chair to me, or any other piece of thing" (112).

Modern readers may find Jackson's narrative style and subject matter difficult to handle, as she does not prioritize physical or historical "reality." Although she clearly believed in the reality and legitimacy of all the events she presents in her writings, Jackson differs from the slave narrators Olney describes (above) in that she is not in the least concerned with eschewing the "creative" or presenting "a clear-glass, neutral memory" (48). From the very start, her writings are full of the fantastic.

Jackson's autotheography begins in the middle of a violent storm that is both physical and supernatural. Jackson's vivid descriptions make it easy to imagine the horror

of this tempest at daybreak, the petrifying streaks of lightning tearing across the sky outside her window, the rolling thunder like the voice of a righteous God who cannot tolerate sin. Amidst the pounding of the elements, Jackson finds that her fear of thunder and lightning, a fear she has been “affected by” to the point of physical illness during thunderstorms for about five years, is indeed a mortal one: “I heard it said to me, ‘This day thy soul is required of thee,’ and all my sins from my childhood rushed into my mind like an over swelling tide, and I expected every clap of thunder to launch my soul at the bar of God with all my sins that I had ever done. I have no language to describe my feeling” (71). In this scene, Jackson believes that God might crash through the front door and tear up the stairs in the form of wind or strike her down with lightning, consuming her sinful existence with holy fire. A menacing inner voice then gives concrete shape to her foreboding, as if the devil were tempting her. “It was suggested to me, ‘The first clap [of thunder] will break your neck down the stairs’ ” (71). Jackson’s terror is palpable as she considers her alternatives for escape: she could climb into bed with her nieces and nephews (but she’s sure God could preserve their lives while killing her between them); she could confess her sins immediately, asking for forgiveness in the final moments of her life (although she reasons that this last-minute strategy “would be an insult to such a merciful God.... an insulted God, whom I had sinned against all my days,” 71). Crouching at the head of the stairs with a deep sense of dread, Jackson decides that “acrying for mercy” is indeed her best option and pours out her suffering in the form of fervent prayer (72).

However, prayer does not readily alleviate the situation. Jackson recalls, “The more I prayed, the worse I felt. My sins like a mountain reached to the skies, black as

sack cloth of hair and the heavens was as brass against my prayers and everything above my head was of one solid blackness” (72). In this lamentation of her sins, Jackson invokes imagery from Old Testament passages detailing the horrible consequences that would occur should the Israelites break their covenant with God by not keeping the commandments. For instance, in addition to pestilence, infertility, crop failure, and military decimation, the punishment for sinning against God includes the heavens closing: “and thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass” (Deuteronomy 28.19); God would no longer hear their cries.<sup>18</sup> Just as the Israelites faced exile from their homeland when disobeying God, Jackson found her sins overwhelming her, exiling her from God’s presence. Jackson also uses the language of Revelation to suggest that her time of judgment had come, as the blackened skies above her demonstrated: “and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair” (Revelation 6.12).<sup>19</sup> By describing her sins and the darkening skies above as “black as sack cloth of hair,” Jackson evokes that quintessential attire of Old Testament mourning made of goat’s hair: sackcloth. Biblical figures such as Jacob, David, and Ahab all humbled themselves before God by putting on this “coarse cloth...worn in mourning, distress, or mortification” in the most uncomfortable way: right next to bare skin (“Sackcloth,” *American Dictionary*). Metaphorically donning this garment of abjection, Jackson vows to literally remain on her knees until God will have mercy on her (72).

---

<sup>18</sup> Also see Leviticus 26.19: “And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass.” As this example demonstrates, although Jackson does not mention a particular version or translation of the Bible when employing biblical phraseology in her writings, her diction suggests a familiarity with the *King James Version*.

<sup>19</sup> While alluding to the day of God’s wrath outlined in Revelation 6 (and its Old Testament counterpart, Joel 2), Jackson might also be referencing Isaiah 50.3: “I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering.”

At the moment when all seems lost, “the cloud bursted” (72), and her spiritual storm ceased. Instead of working against her, the physical elements became a form of rejoicing for Jackson: “My spirit was light, my heart was filled with love for God and all mankind. And the lightning, which was a moment ago the messenger of death, was now the messenger of peace, joy, and consolation. And I rose from my knees, ran down stairs, opened the door to let the lightning in the house, for it was like sheets of glory to my soul” (72). In this, her moment of justification and reconciliation with God, Jackson embraces the elements. The lightning becomes a harbinger of peace rather than a portent of destruction, and she wants to throw open the doors and windows so that God’s glory can fall on her.

Jackson does not experience this glory alone, however; her brother, Joseph, (apparently woken up by all the commotion) comes down the stairs to find her praising the Lord, and he joins her in thanking God for the gift of salvation. Directly after this prayer, Jackson feels her heart go out to “all mankind.” She continues, “I then felt a desire for all the world to come and love God for Christ’s sake. I thought by faith I saw the blessed Jesus who placed my case before the Father, pleading for all sinners” (72). This statement is significant for two reasons: first, this is the place where we begin to see the action of Jackson’s “spirit eye,” her mystical, God-given vision, and second, Jackson yearns for “all the world” to be saved—the first indication in her autobiographical writings that the newly-converted Jackson will now reach out to convert a sinful “world.”

In nineteenth-century religious parlance, as in some evangelical circles today, the phrase “of the world” most often referred to ungodly people, things, and activities. Temporal, immoral things of “the world” were often contrasted with eternal, spiritual

ideals; “worldly” pursuits and pleasures that might lead the believer away from God (gossiping, gambling, drinking, unchastity, etc.) were contrasted with righteous behavior (modest dress and speech, faithful church attendance, praying for others, etc.).<sup>20</sup> More specifically, people “of the world” were those who did not believe in salvation through Jesus Christ, particularly those who did not actively participate in a Christian faith community. This boundary between pious believers and a wicked “world” was demarcated more severely by religious separatist groups like the Shakers. As Diane Sasson notes, “the Shakers’ contention that perfection was unattainable by individuals outside the order and protection of the holy community set them apart” (Sasson 10). Unlike the Quakers, for instance, who believed that “ ‘ being called out of the world’ referred to the attempt to lead a life of purity and simplicity,” the Shakers employed a religious model closer to that promoted by George Whitefield, “the Grand Itinerant of the Great Awakening,” during the eighteenth century: “[Whitefield’s] model for the church, derived from his interpretation of apostolic community in the New Testament, was a pure communion of regenerate saints *gathered out of the world* and exercising mutual discipline among themselves by inspiration of the Holy Ghost” (emphasis mine, Marini 11, 14). In short, the meaning of the idiom “of the world” ran the gamut from general irreligiosity to anyone who did not belong to a given segregated community of saints adopting theological and doctrinal standards that all members would subscribe to and uphold. These communities took Jesus’ prayer for his followers quite seriously: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (John 17.16).

---

<sup>20</sup> Webster’s 1877 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defines “worldly” as follows: “pertaining to this world or life, in contradistinction from the life to come; secular; temporal; devoted to this life and its enjoyments; bent on gain; as, *worldly* pleasures, affections, honor, lusts, men, and the like” (“Worldly,” def. 2).



When Jackson first expresses her impassioned desire to share God's love and mercy with "the world" immediately after experiencing that forgiveness herself, she uses "the world" to mean people who have not yet been redeemed by God's grace (72). Such a desire to share the joy of Christ is not unusual in nineteenth-century descriptions of conversion. Richard Allen, founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, expressed similar feelings at the beginning of his autobiography: "My soul was filled. I cried, enough for me—the Saviour died. Now my confidence was strengthened that the Lord, for Christ's sake, had heard my prayers, and pardoned all my sins. I was constrained to go from house to house, exhorting my old companions, and telling to all around what a dear Saviour I had found" (5). Like Allen, Jackson's first prayers as a new convert are for her next door neighbors (73). However, Jackson fears that if she is not careful, her faith may become hypocritical and perceived by others as a "pharisee religion" (74)—that is, a show of devotion glorifying herself, not God.<sup>21</sup> As a result of her fears, during the period following her initial conversion but before her sanctification, Jackson seems unsure of her conversion methods and message to "the world." Refining her spiritual sight and gaining a fuller understanding of the message of salvation necessary to reach out to "the world" requires another work of grace: sanctification.

It is hard to overstate the significance of the vision accompanying Jackson's sanctification in 1831. When God rewards Jackson's spiritual exertion through direct revelation, showing her that original sin, the sin of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, was a

---

<sup>21</sup> Throughout the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the Pharisees serve as a foil for Jesus, trying to get him to say something that might contradict the law of Moses. However, Jesus often traps them with their own words, gives answers about the kingdom of God that they fail to understand, or proves them to be religious hypocrites. For instance, see Jesus' instructions in the Sermon on the Mount: "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men..." (Matthew 6.5). Jesus suggests that praying "in secret" is actually the more pious choice (Matthew 6.6), and Jackson follows this advice (73).

sexual one, Jackson comes to realize that a life of the flesh is completely contradictory to life in the Spirit.<sup>22</sup> The state of spiritual duress under which Jackson labors while “crying to God with all [her] might, soul, body and strength” for the blessing of sanctification sounds similar to a vision experienced by Ann Lee, the woman who the Shakers thought to be the second incarnation of Christ (76). Jackson’s prayerful pleas to obtain sanctification resonate with Lee’s earlier experience of arduous, suffering prayer while imprisoned in her English homeland in 1770:

In the midst of [Lee’s] sufferings and earnest cries to God, her soul was filled with divine light, and the mysteries of the spiritual world were brought clearly to her understanding.... In these extraordinary manifestations, she had a full and clear view of the mystery of iniquity, of the root and foundation of human depravity, and of the very act of transgression, committed by the first man and woman, in the garden of Eden. Here she saw whence and wherein all mankind were lost from God... ([Green and Wells] 8-9)

For Jackson, as for Ann Lee before her, the “sin of the fall of man” is sexual sin that entered humankind through Adam and Eve, a corrosive lust that forever taints human reproduction and the physical bonds of marriage. Jackson’s sanctification experience, in her words, “destroyed the lust of my flesh and made me to utterly hate it. And of all things it seemed the most filthy in the sight of God—both in the married and unmarried, it all seemed alike in the sight of a holy God to me, although I had never heard anybody say it was wrong” (88). Although not fully articulated until later in her writings, Jackson here begins to explain her position on celibacy through wording reminiscent of the apostle Paul describing the dangers of marriage: “He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married careth

---

<sup>22</sup> Although Jackson does not reference it, perhaps one of the strongest biblical foundations for this dichotomy can be found in Galatians 5.16-17: “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.”

for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife” (I Cor. 7.32b-33; Jackson 180). In the belief system outlined by Paul and espoused by Jackson (and, as she insists throughout her autotheography, given to her directly by God), in order to “attend upon the Lord without distraction” (I Cor. 7.35b), the believer should refrain from engaging with the “things...of the world,” including marriage.

By choosing to live a “virgin,” celibate life even within marriage, Jackson began to separate herself from “the world,” both the unredeemed “world” at large and the “world” of other Christians who did not believe in salvation from all sin through the “self-denying path” of celibacy—the same path that Jesus modeled in his life on earth. Even before she is exposed to Shaker doctrine—before interacting with Shaker people, attending Shaker worship services, or reading Shaker documents—Jackson feels God showing her a distinction between a life of Christ-like holiness and a life in “the world.” Her eventual encounter with the Shakers only buttresses this essential division, adding experiential and theological accoutrements to a previously-established—and, for Jackson, divinely ordained—dichotomy. Having already embraced this binary, the Shaker habit of referring to non-Shakers as “the world” would have been easy for Jackson to appreciate.

In some ways, Jackson’s desire to separate from “the world” also follows a typical pattern established in the Methodist conversion narrative, “a common Methodist genre in which is stressed the drama of the second birth as a means of escaping a *world of sin* and licentiousness, and of entering a *world of faith* and godly discipline” (my emphasis, Hempton 60). In Jackson’s case, however, “godly discipline” comes in a very specific form of obedience through sexual abstinence, and the “world of sin” includes all those who do not practice celibacy as integral to salvation.

In fact, Jackson's orientation toward and deployment of the expression "the world" shifts across her text. Early on, her references to "the world" seem to denote anyone who has not experienced justification (forgiveness from sin, being "justified" and redeemed through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross), but "the world" quickly comes to include both the sinful, unjustified "world" *and* the "world" of already-justified Christian churches who do not practice "full holiness" (advocate celibacy). As her narrative advances, the word "world" takes on a connotation more specific to Jackson: she is called to be a witness to the wider non-Shaker "world" that includes potential black converts to Shakerism. In due course, Jackson utilizes Shaker phraseology with a political and racial imperative that seems to bewilder white Shaker leaders. Her usage of the phrase "the world," although clearly Shaker-inflected, is consistently layered with more meaning than the usual Shaker us/them binary of Shaker/non-Shaker. For Jackson, "the world" is full of "her people"—her fellow African-Americans—and she cannot separate herself from them by taking up permanent residence in a rural Shaker community. Instead, she spends only a few years living in a Shaker colony, learning their ways and deepening her relationship to the divine by experiencing communal worship and relating her own visionary encounters to other Shakers during their "Era of Manifestations."<sup>23</sup>

When she feels God more and more urgently calling her to witness to "her people,"

---

<sup>23</sup> The "Era of Manifestations" is the name given to a period of Shaker history from 1837-1845 when there was a great outpouring of spiritual gifts on numerous individuals within Shaker colonies. Such spiritual "gifts" included gifts of movement such as dancing, twirling, and the like; gifts of imaginary objects; miracles and gifts of healing; and gifts during which individuals would become mediums, such as speaking in tongues and visions or trances during which the spirits of departed Shaker leaders (e.g., Ann Lee, Lucy Wright, William Lee, etc.), various historical figures, and even ethnic/racial minorities would appear. Angels and other forms of divine presence abounded. In addition to spirit visitations, individuals could be "given" heavenly songs and drawings, or spiritual "gifts" that might manifest in interesting physical ways, such as a "sweeping gift" (a gift that would aid in the cleaning process through a God-given desire to use a broom). For more on this period of spiritual revival and its aftermath, see Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (165-200), and Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (115-135). For an interesting comparison of this period and the Salem witchcraft incident, see Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia* (43-56).

however, Jackson asks the Shaker leaders at Watervliet for leave to start a Shaker out-family in Philadelphia. Because Jackson honed her ability to perceive God's voice and distinguish it from any other influences, to "know His Spirit from all others" (85), she was rewarded with a lifelong vocation of preaching perfection and a special ministry to "the world" in her own city.

### **Becoming a Prophet: Separating from Family and the "Professed Christian World"**

One of the most important dreams that Jackson records in her autotheography is under the heading "A Dream in the Garden." (Notably, Jackson attributes this dream to the year 1831—the same year as her sanctification experience.) In the dream, Jackson finds herself surrounded by luscious, tempting berry bushes: "the blackberries was ripe, long and beautiful" (94). Just as she goes to pick these lovely berries, she notices that there are snakes lurking in the bushes: "Every one had their mouth open, their stings out, and they were ready to spring upon me" (94). The vicious snakes are so prevalent that they block her exit from the garden. Realizing that there is no path of escape, Jackson cries out to God "in faith and humble prayer" and is delivered from the snakes, passing by them "unhurt" (94). In the paragraph following her description of this dream, Jackson interprets it as follows: "I saw in my dream the great opposition I would have to go through in my pilgrimage, and how I was to believe it was by living in obedience to all that God required of me, and then I should have faith in God in the time of trouble. And I would be able to pray to Him, and I would find deliverance in Him, from all my enemies" (94). Jackson goes on to remark that the garden stood for her "fallen nature," and that the

berries were “the fruit on which [her] carnal propensities subsisted” (94). According to her understanding of the dream, God was teaching her how to live her life. “I was very careful after that about picking or eating anything that I knowed would feed my fallen nature” (94).

Like Joseph, perhaps the most famous dreamer and dream interpreter in the Old Testament, Jackson presents herself as blessed with vivid dreams and the gift of deciphering their meaning. Her dream of the dangers of her fallen nature—represented by fleshy, juicy blackberries—follows right on the heels of a section of her autotheography that describes “the opposition” she faced from those around her. As any Old Testament dreamer or prophet could tell you, being God’s divine instrument is no easy matter. No one wants to hear about sin or its consequences, and the path of holiness is a hard road to travel, littered with temptations and overgrown with lust (“blackberries”). A prophet may model God’s plan for holy living, but setting an upright example and preaching obedient repentance might not be enough to corral a wayward people.

Jackson seems initially reluctant to call herself a prophet, perhaps because, early in her career, she heard a wicked voice saying “ ‘You are no prophet’ ” (81), warring with her divine inner voice by trying to contradict God’s instructions and undermine her will to minister to a woman on her deathbed. However, over the course of her autotheography, Jackson increasingly invokes Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, prophets who were called to proclaim a message similar to words that Jackson heard spoken to her supernaturally in 1843: “ ‘The Lord will surely go forth in Judgment and pour His wrath upon all the earth. How terrible is the indignation of the Lord God!’ ” (175). Jackson would probably have identified with the words of Jesus,

whose teachings were initially rejected by those closest to him: “A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (Mark 6.4).<sup>24</sup> In a similar way, Jackson’s immediate family and friends were bewildered by her decision to lead a holy, celibate life. Their hostility and resistance caused her to feel that she “had no friends, at home nor abroad” (87).

After her sanctification and attendant vision of original sin, Jackson considered her marriage to her husband, Samuel, untenable. Upon returning home from the prayer meeting during which she obtained sanctification, Jackson immediately perceived hostility radiating from her husband, threatening to undermine her elated, worshipful mood:

The spirit of night which I saw in my husband’s face, and the cloud of spiritual darkness that covered me from his countenance, blighted the glory that was upon me, so I closed my eyes within me from every earthly object, and breathed to that God who had just answered me by fire, to the burning the lust of my flesh, and showing me that lust was not of Him, but of the Fall, to give me strength in Him, to approach my wicked husband, and like one of old, a double portion of the spirit came upon me, and I went by him like a flash: they saw not the army that was with me when I came in the door and I can truly say, I was as it were, carried away in the spirit, praising God. (295-6)<sup>25</sup>

Neither her husband nor her brother, who were both standing in the doorway, could see the divine army standing behind Jackson. In this instance, Jackson likens herself to the

---

<sup>24</sup> Also see Matthew 13.53-58 and Luke 4.16-30.

<sup>25</sup> Here is an instance where I question Humez’s editorial choices in *Gifts of Power*. This cited account of Jackson’s first post-sanctification encounter with her husband appears in the Appendix of “Significant Textual Variants” rather than in the book proper. Humez comments on her decision making process in choosing which of these “variants” to place in the text and which to include in the Appendix: “[Variants] represent cases where the two versions of the autobiography told the *same* story in *significantly differing* ways. I chose one of these for inclusion in the text. The other, usually the less detailed or less interesting of the two, went into the Appendix” (emphasis in original, 67). In this case, the more detailed account—and, interestingly, the account with more theological language and an additional biblical allusion—appears in the Appendix. I have chosen to reference the “variant” at this moment because the pious language and additional reference to Elisha are important in understanding Jackson’s understanding of herself as a chosen witness for God’s power. Jackson is willing to use her body as an instrument of witnessing, much as Old Testament prophets like Elisha used theirs for God’s purposes.

Old Testament prophet Elisha; she receives a “double portion” of the spirit, just as Elisha requested from his mentor, Elijah, as a prophetic inheritance, and, like Elisha, she is able to see (and wield) the divine armies of God, even when others cannot (2 Kings 2.9 and 6.15-17).

Having successfully passed by “like a flash,” Jackson continues to praise God through the night. Jackson then exhibits an unusual method of praise when Samuel puts a pot of coffee on the stove: “So in my march appraising God, I went from the cellar door to the [hot] stove and when I would get to the stove I would lay my hands on the stove and then turn to the cellar with my eyes shut all the while” (77). Not surprisingly, Samuel is more than unsettled by this demonstration, as Jackson neither burns her hands nor falls down through the open cellar door. Jackson goes to great lengths to show her husband that God alone could possess her body and give her instruction.

Other critics take a comparable view of Jackson’s behavior in this scene. Humez puts it succinctly: “the message to her husband—that her body is no longer even hers, let alone his—could not be plainer” (*Gifts of Power* 18). In *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*, Joanne Braxton reads this miraculous scene as proof of “Jackson’s discovery of sexual self-control as a means of attaining personal power.... [including] not only mastery of one’s sexual appetite but also mastery over every aspect of one’s physical body” (63-64). She also comments on the significance of the kitchen setting of the above scene and the implicit bedroom setting of Jackson’s sexual withholding: “the stove and the bed, domestic symbols of women’s limited sphere, are key sites in Jackson’s rebellion” (64). By reading Jackson’s actions as a declaration of individual power and freedom from domesticity, Braxton foregrounds



possible personal reasons Jackson may have had for “rebellious” against her husband rather than a spiritual explanation for her behavior (i.e., Jackson’s understanding that God could guide her movements and allow her to come away unhurt after touching a hot stove, or Jackson’s insistence that her body belongs to God).

Since Jackson does not write about the nature of her marriage before her conversion and sanctification, we can only speculate about any problems with her husband that might have made her want to leave him, issues that might have contributed to her relief when she felt God telling her that sexual activity could not be compatible with holiness. Had she seen Samuel’s face darken before, covered with a “spirit of night” that portended physical abuse, verbal onslaught, or sexual coercion? Whatever the case, Jackson seems to have needed radical spiritual experiences to change the course of her life, as expressed in the scope and intensity of her visions and dreams during this period (vast armies of angels support her, huge mountains rise before her, blood gushes from vicious wounds, and so on).

Although Samuel reformed some of his irreligious habits and turned toward Christianity, he remained “in the work of the Fall”—he did not believe in celibacy within marriage—which was a “great trouble” for Jackson (79). Even though she does not directly mention any particular sexual confrontations between herself and Samuel, it is clear that he did not believe it necessary to cease all sexual relations in order to pursue holiness. Moreover, Samuel did not understand his wife’s need to refrain from activities that God did not specifically tell her to do. For instance, when he suggests that the two of them attend a “love feast at Bethel”—a “simple fellowship [meal] for the Methodist faithful” at the first African Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia—Jackson

declines (Jackson 89; Hempton 79). In order to faithfully follow the spirit of God alone, Jackson notes, “I went nowhere, said nothing, done nothing, without I received a ‘command’ as I called it” (89). Later that day, Jackson felt God guiding her to leave the house and go out into the neighborhood to pray for the sick. She asks Samuel to go with her, and he agrees. After successfully visiting and praying with a number of sick people, Jackson says to her husband, “ ‘Samuel, when I told you, as I got up from supper, I had three sick people to visit, I knowed no more who or where they were than you—only by following the Lord’ ” (91). Had they gone to the love feast, those sick people would not have received spiritual attention, as all the ministers were busy at the feast (90). Jackson is eager to explain to Samuel that her covenant with God to obey her inner guide at all times takes precedence over any of Samuel’s particular wishes, not because she wants to cross him, but because God has greater work for her to do. Jackson implores her husband, “ ‘Only leave me free to obey my blessed Lord and Savior’ ” (91), since Samuel had witnessed the good that could come from her obedience.

To the dismay of her husband and her brother, Joseph, Jackson commenced a period of intense work and ministry in the months after her sanctification. Her inventory of activities included daily household chores, caring for her brother and his children along with her husband, taking in items to sew “for [a] living,” holding holiness meetings all around Philadelphia, praying in the wee hours of the morning, and fasting three days a week (86). Jackson also ignored inclement weather when following God’s orders; for instance, she once set out in the rain for a camp meeting even though her husband and brother “both thought it was the most imprudent thing [she] could do” (112). But Joseph and Samuel’s concerns about Jackson were deeper than mere “imprudent” behavior; they

began to assert that her convictions and hectic schedule were destroying her health and perhaps her sanity, too.

Now my troubles began at home. My brother, for the first time, gave me a sharp reproof about my movements. He said, "Thee is a destroying thy constitution. Thee works hard all day and rounds one half of the night, and eats nothing, till thee is worn away to anatomy. Thee don't look like thyself.... Thee will go out of thy mind.... Now, my dear sister, the Lord don't require us to bury ourselves. The devil sees that the Lord has a work for thee to do, and he want to kill thee." "Yes," answered Samuel, "Joseph—and she prays the other half of the night. I never seen such a woman.... I think she is agoing crazy." (86-87)

Clearly, Jackson's daily rigors provoked strong reactions from both of the men in her life, reactions similar to those faced by her contemporaries as described in their spiritual autobiographies.<sup>26</sup> Yet it is hard to believe that Samuel and Joseph had only Jackson's interests at heart. Perhaps they felt that Jackson's energies would be better spent in her roles as primary domestic caretaker and wage-earning seamstress than in her new role as lay preacher. Also, they were likely concerned about their own reputations in the community. Samuel may have felt awkward attending prayer meetings led by his wife and could have felt his masculinity threatened by her celibacy-is-necessary-for-holiness message. (After all, Jackson's promotion of abstinence might seem like a public rejection of her husband's character, sexual behavior, and/or "rights" within marriage.) Jackson's "virgin life" message also put her on the wrong side of black Methodist ministers in the area, which would have been difficult for Joseph since he held numerous church positions in the AME Bethel Church, including some ministerial duties. Therefore, it is not

---

<sup>26</sup> As I alluded to in Chapter 2, Julia Foote's husband was less than pleased with her holiness doctrine: "He said I was getting more crazy every day, and getting others in the same way, and that if I did not stop he would send me back home or to the crazy-house" (Foote 196). In *Some Wild Visions*, Elizabeth Elkin Grammer reminds us that many nineteenth-century preaching women wrote about "their struggles with disagreeable husbands who oppose their ministries" (39). Grammer refers to this trend as a "pattern of captivity and restoration" in autobiographies by Foote, Zilpha Elaw, and Amanda Berry Smith (39).

surprising that Samuel and Joseph seem to have tried to regulate Jackson's behavior in the privacy of their home, without the input of the wider community.

### **Celibacy and the True Meaning of "Holiness"**

One of the most interesting moments in Jackson's autotheography follows the above incident of conflict with Samuel and Joseph. Jackson seems particularly upset by her brother's harsh indictment of her activities, as he was "like a father" to her, and she did not like to speak against him, even if he was wrong (87). Yet Jackson is determined to pursue the holy life God has shown her, no matter who stands in her way: "I had started to go to the promised land and I wanted husband, brother, and *all the world* to go with me, but my mind was made up to stop for none" (87, emphasis mine). This quotation also suggests that the feelings Jackson experienced during her initial conversion, wanting to proclaim God's love to "all the world" (72), have intensified; she continues, saying, "I loved all, friend and foe, saint and sinner, and God enabled me to manifest that love in all my conduct" (87). Despite persecution from those around her, Jackson is determined to let her loving example shine through in her behavior. Nevertheless, Jackson's daily obedience to God in pursuit and promotion of celibate holiness was taxing in that she realized her "labor... brought [her] closer to the Lord and further from the *professed Christian world*" (87, emphasis mine). Significantly, in this passage, Jackson expands her definition of "the world" and sets herself apart from it more concretely; members of "the world" consist of all those who want to remain "in the flesh" by standing in opposition to "full holiness," including family members, friends, and non-

celibate professed Christians. According to Jackson's theological framework, "...a holy life is the line by which the righteous and the wicked are to be separated" (201), and that holy life must incorporate celibacy.<sup>27</sup> No established affection for her brother could keep her from making this distinction.

In the course of her commentary on this difficult situation—her conception of holiness was pushing her farther away from her Christian family and friends—Jackson declares, "I was like one deaf and dumb among them" (87). Making use of this phrase allows Jackson to apply the words of the psalmist beseeching God to remain close during times of trial, asking for protection from friends and neighbors who seek to hurt him: "They also that seek after my life lay snares for me: and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day long. But I, as a deaf man, heard not; and I was as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth.... For in thee, O Lord, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God" (Psalm 38.12-13, 15). Only God can sustain Jackson and keep her from damage that could be done through "various reports [that] were circulated" about her (87). With God's help, her ignorance of the machinations of those who seek to hurt her will be a blessing. God's "continual instruction" prepares her for an extended spiritual "journey" and teaches her that she must not "let the sun go down" on her anger, praying for her enemies rather than condemning them (88).<sup>28</sup>

Jackson uses a pungent simile to describe the particulars of what happened when she tried to deliver a message of celibate holiness to her prayer group: "...the effects that

---

<sup>27</sup> There are numerous references to the "righteous" and the "wicked" in the Old Testament, but Jackson may be confirming the righteousness of the Shaker Way by alluding to a passage in one of the minor prophets telling of a select group of those who decided to revere the Lord: "And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not" (Malachi 3.17-18).

<sup>28</sup> See Ephesians 4.26: "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

followed, were as if I had opened a bottle of cayenne pepper among the people” (87). Though Jackson’s efforts were not well received, it was fitting for Jackson to want to hash out her holiness principles with others, as this was one of the most important functions of the “class meeting” format. These weekly group meetings were a unique and successful tool of Methodism:

The early records of American Methodism show that classes were the most important building blocks of the movement.... Although classes...varied in terms of emotional intensity and noisiness, their sheer ubiquity in the surviving records of Methodism show them to be places where members were assimilated, voices were found, spiritual experiences were shared, and communities of faith were built. (Hempton 78-79)

Unlike smaller praying “bands,” which consisted of only a few members of the same gender and marital status (e.g., married women only, unmarried men only, etc.), Methodist classes could consist of anywhere from 12 to 30 or so members in various combinations of gender and marital status (Allen and Tapsico 97, 105; Hempton 78). These localized branches of Methodist society allowed members to call one another to account and deepen their faith, exhorting, witnessing, and confessing to one another in furtherance of salvation. According to Jackson’s account, she first “felt impressed to have” a weekly “little meeting” beginning in March 1831; this meeting, which Jackson refers to as a “Covenant Meeting, because we covenanted together for a holy life,” seems to have followed the Methodist class meeting model and was led alternately by Jackson and Sister Mary Peterson (102). Along with other holiness meetings Jackson attended in the area, this “Covenant Meeting” became a place to debate the doctrine of sanctification, examining the facets of Christian perfection as she understood them.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> There are a few references to “meetings” Jackson attended or held in the part of her writings detailing the first couple of years after she obtained sanctification. It seems that the “meeting” during which she obtained sanctification in January of 1831 was a prayer meeting, part of a neighborhood revival, but the weekly

Jackson started calling for a higher degree of sanctification at these meetings, exhorting others to pursue a holy life including sexual abstinence as a form of full obedience to God's will. In response, people "would begin to dispute [her] testimony, by saying they never expected to be holy in this life.... They did not expect to be saved by works, but by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. To be sanctified was the highest state of grace they had ever heard of and that was enough for them" (87). These sentences indicate that Jackson's conception of holiness brought a number of doctrinal anxieties about justification and sanctification to the fore in the minds of her interlocutors. First, by bringing a "faith vs. works" argument into play, those who opposed Jackson were invoking a concept with a long history in Protestant Christianity (particularly through Martin Luther), the principle of *sola fide*, Latin for "by faith alone."<sup>30</sup> They were affirming that only justification by faith in Christ would lead to salvation; "righteousness," not any righteousness they could display through "deed[s]," would save them (Jackson 87). For those disagreeing with Jackson's testimony, the daily obedience she espoused was another form of trying to obtain salvation through "works" rather than faith. For Jackson, however, this obedience involved a daily process of being consecrated to God, allowing the believer to "see [her] sinful nature more clearly" and to experience

---

meetings thereafter moved "from house to house," and Jackson "bore a testimony against all sin" wherever she went (73, 86). In discussing her conflict with the Methodist churches on account of the "meeting" led by herself and Sister Mary Peterson, Jackson describes a "Covenant Meeting" with only a few founding members (including her husband, Samuel, and a couple of others), later attended by numerous others who came to see what they were up to (103).

<sup>30</sup> Luther is often credited as the first to recognize the significance of the doctrine of "salvation...from faith alone" (Davey 180). According to Pauline justification by faith, God's grace through Jesus' sacrifice saves those who believe in Jesus (Romans 3.24-26). In essence, the old law (of Moses) is past, so salvation can no longer come through the law, but only through the blood of Christ. But the book of James makes the point that good works are also necessary in order to live a life consummate with faith: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2.26). For an extended treatment of the doctrine of *sola fide* in the Methodist tradition, see John Wesley's 1746 published sermon "Justification by Faith" (182-199).

“daily growth in grace, in wisdom, and in understanding” (130-31)—essentially, an extension of Wesleyan sanctification.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, the claims made by other meeting attendees display apprehension about whether or not a state of sinless perfection could be obtained before death and some hesitation over the importance of sanctification in the Christian life. Similar misgivings can be seen in the articles of faith pertaining to sanctification in *The Doctrines and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1817). These articles detail “salvation by faith” as a three-step process integrating “works” as a manifestation of faith: “1st. That pardon (salvation begun) is received by faith, producing works. 2d. That holiness (salvation continued) is faith working by love. 3d. That heaven (salvation finished) is the reward of this faith” (45-46). Already in this process we see the three major phases of Methodist existence: “birth, life, and death, or to Methodize these natural processes, conversion, sanctification, and holy dying, were at the heart of Methodist spirituality” (Hempton 60). Yet the second phase—holy living, or sanctification—has an uncertain timeline and a potentially indefinite realization. The following section from the *AME Doctrines and Discipline* (1817) highlights the uncertainties felt over the important issue of “entire sanctification.” (Note that the question/answer format has the effect of amplifying these anxieties.)

IV. Q. 1. How much is allowed by our brethren who differ from us, with regard to entire sanctification?

A. They grant, 1st. That every one must be entirely sanctified, in the article of death:

---

<sup>31</sup> Jackson’s words here might echo the biblical language describing the physical and spiritual maturation of Jesus during his childhood and adolescence: “And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.... And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2.40, 52).



2d. That till then a believer daily grows in grace, comes nearer and nearer to perfection:

3d. That we ought to be continually pressing after this, and to exhort all others so to do.

*Q.* 2. What do we allow them?

*A.* We grant, 1st. That many of those who have died in the faith, yea, the greater part of those we have known, were not sanctified throughout, not made perfect in love, till a little before death:

2d. That the term, 'sanctified' is continually applied by *St. Paul*, to all that were justified, were true believers:

3d. That by this term alone, he rarely (if ever) means, saved from all sin:

4th. That consequently, it is not proper to use it in this sense, without adding the words 'wholly, entirely,' or the like:

5th. That the inspired writers almost continually speak of, or to those who were justified; but very rarely, either of, or to those, who were wholly sanctified:

6th. That consequently, it behoves [sic] us to speak in public almost continually of the state of justification: but more rarely, at least in full and explicit terms, concerning entire sanctification. (Allen and Tapsico 47-48)

Sanctification is a more difficult subject than justification, particularly when it comes to the perfection of “whole” or “entire” salvation from sin, a state which, as the above articles suggest, may not be possible until the last moment before death. As those debating this matter with Jackson argued, day-to-day holiness “in this life” might not be possible; they were content to let the matter be (87). While Jackson drew on and extended Methodist logic in her understanding of the second blessing, melding “entire sanctification” with the “full holiness” of dedicated celibacy, few were able to “receive” this doctrine (88).

Referring specifically to the “Covenant Meeting” held at Sister Mary Peterson’s, Jackson says, “I always came away wounded on the account of my testimony against all sin” (103). Other members seem to have been discouraged, too; while Jackson and Sister Peterson often had a gift to lead the group, others (including Samuel) “were not very gifted either in prayer or in speaking” (102). Yet despite tensions within this small group, the word seems to have spread that something interesting was going on in these weekly meetings; others from the area, including Methodist preachers, came “to see what we were doing, because it was reported that women were holding meetings and leading classes and leading men and it was not right” (103).

Conflict with local ministers seems to have occurred in part through people who regularly attended Jackson’s meeting, as they themselves were Methodists and “thought that [she] ought to join their church”; when she would not, she was accused of “chopping up...churches” (103). The word “chopping” implies a kind of hacking, imprecise, indiscriminate violence being done to the churches, but Jackson’s next sentence shows that she, too, felt as though she was being wounded in the exchange: “I always came away from those meetings cut and carved, but I was on my Master’s errand and felt always willing to bleed in His cause” (103). In fact, although Jackson claims that she had no desire to damage the churches or gut their membership (“...I had nowhere to take them but to God. I only wanted them to believe that they must be holy, and that in order to be holy, they must live in perfect obedience every day”), her activities and beliefs likely threatened area Methodists theologically and organizationally (103). By “aholding class meetings and aleading the men,” Jackson (and, presumably, Sister Mary Peterson) threatened the authority of male elders, deacons, and/or preachers in charge of

the local circuit by holding an unauthorized meeting (105). According to the rules governing Methodist class meetings outlined in the *AME Doctrines and Discipline* (1817), class leaders should be “not only men of sound judgment, but men truly devoted to God”—notice that women are not included as potential leaders—and new leaders should be first recommended and then observed by other already-established leaders or ministers (Allen and Tapsico 103-104). By operating outside of the administration of Methodist society, Jackson was indeed making it difficult for ministers in her area to keep tabs on class membership. More importantly, by preaching an uncompromising and potentially revolutionary holiness model, Jackson may have been perceived as doubly threatening: both churches and marriages could end up on the chopping block.

It is important to think about the “threat” of Jackson’s celibacy-as-holiness model in the context of racial and gender politics in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Erica Armstrong Dunbar explains that ordinary black women (as opposed to “black elites”) often turned to church tribunals at Mother Bethel Church to regulate the activities of their neighbors. The private lives of husbands and wives were often under scrutiny, particularly when it came to domestic disputes and unapproved sexual conduct (such as premarital sexual activity). Women could also bring charges of adultery or abuse against their husbands. These charges could be serious if the outcome of the tribunal involved excommunication:

The tribunal accounts demonstrate the immense control of the church regarding the lives of its members. Expulsion from the church was no small thing: black life was centered on religion and denominational affiliations. It meant social isolation and disconnection from any mutual aid or social associations, since those societies were so closely tied to the churches. (Dunbar 63)<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> For more on the politics of church tribunals in black and biracial churches, see Collier-Thomas (33-34), Dodson (84), and Frey and Wood (187).

That Jackson chose to preach and practice radical, celibate holiness in the face of likely alienation from one of the most powerful social institutions governing the black community speaks to the gravity of her belief. Certainly, if Jackson did have a problem with her husband, the accepted channel for addressing the matter would have been the church tribunal. (Of course, Samuel could have also brought his wife before the tribunal for her unorthodox choice of celibacy within marriage.) Yet Jackson chose to operate outside the system of traditional Christian marriage, circumventing male ministerial authority (those who judged the tribunals) and turning away from the social mores that were upheld by women who called others to account in the context of church tribunals. Still worse, by openly promoting her holiness views, Jackson was asking others to potentially give up their own marriages, which, coupled with her implicit criticism of the AME Church, practically amounted to asking her fellow African-Americans to give up a clear path to respectability.<sup>33</sup> These considerations beg the question: with so much to leave behind, why did Jackson choose the path to celibacy on the Shaker Way?

### **Celibacy and “Waymark” Christology: Preparing to Travel the Shaker Path**

For Jackson, the theological cornerstone of celibate holiness was the example of Jesus’ life: “I clearly saw by faith in the light of God, that God intended us as His spiritual children, that we should live on earth as Jesus did” (105). It is important to note that, at this juncture in her autotheography, Jackson begins to infuse her prose with more

---

<sup>33</sup> “The organizers of the AME Church firmly believed that an independent black denomination would enhance the social respectability of African Americans and advance the community’s aspirations for social mobility” (Dodson 42). Legal, Christian marriages were an important part of those aspirations, particularly since slaves did not have the privilege of lawful marriages and because prevailing racist stereotypes characterized African Americans as sexually loose, lascivious, and/or sexually aggressive.

Shaker language. The phrase “spiritual children” indicates a life in regeneration, a post-millennial social order where the biological ties of the flesh are dissolved and spiritual ties are knit, emphasizing “the rebirth of the human soul in the Christ Spirit” (Deignan 161). Jackson states that she frequently found herself testifying on this point under the influence of God’s spirit, her body a conduit:

I often would have a gift in our public meetings, after souls would speak their feelings, before I was aware, I would be on my feet inciting them to the life of Jesus as our only waymark to God, showing them that if He was the door, why, it is clear that we must come into His life, practice principles and do the work that He done or we are not His. This made no small stir among the preachers. (105)

We can infer from this passage that, as one Shaker Elder from New Lebanon suggested, “those Christians who worship Jesus in order to atone for their perpetual sin of Adam and yet continue to commit it” actually “miss the point of Christ’s message” (Kitch 56).<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, Jackson here exposes the fallacy of expecting to obtain salvation through Jesus Christ while continuing to commit the “sin of Adam”—the sexual sin of generation. This passage also indicates that Jackson’s “waymark” Christology seems to have caught the attention of high-ranking church officials early on. In a section under the heading “The Bishop Came to Hear that He Might Accuse,” Jackson narrates what happened when Morris Brown, who became the second Bishop of the AME Church in 1828 and who was in the process of assuming the pastorate at Bethel, came to observe a class she led.<sup>35</sup>

Wisely, Jackson preached “on the spiritual meaning of ‘the letter,’ showing how the letter killeth and how the spirit of God would make us alive through Jesus Christ our Lord, if

---

<sup>34</sup> As outlined in her text and endnotes, Kitch is referencing ideas promoted by Frederick W. Evans (56, 70).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Allen died on March 26, 1831; between 1828 and 1831, Allen was already cutting back on the intensity of his work, and Morris Brown took over many of his duties (Newman 288, 245). As Jackson dates her meeting to around March of 1831, it is not clear whether or not Allen had yet passed when Brown came to observe her leadership.

we was willing” (105). Together with the verse before it, the biblical reference to “the letter” vs. “the spirit” reads: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3.5-6). By illuminating this passage, Jackson implies that her ministerial competency comes from God via the Holy Spirit. Claiming the authority of the spirit and showing the ways in which the spirit could work through her—even one of the preachers accompanying Bishop Brown “came down over the tops of the people for [her] to lead him”—Jackson was able to demonstrate that the Holy Ghost moved her to preach (106).<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, Brown’s affirmation of Jackson’s work (““If ever the Holy Ghost was in any place, it was in that meeting’”) did not end all ministerial persecution for her (106). Yet, in the context of her narrative, Brown’s approval, together with numerous other confirmations from those Jackson witnessed to, both white and black, become proofs for her readers that her gifts and vocation were indeed God-given. In her autotheography, Jackson presents herself as a more able minister than other nearby ministers. First, she is more competent than her brother, Joseph, who does not know how to talk to his own dying son about the conversion of his soul; Jackson is the one who divinely foreknows the child’s death and helps to usher him through the processes of confession, justification, and sanctification (116-18). In another telling episode, God restores sight to an old blind woman through Jackson’s hands (134). Later that woman

---

<sup>36</sup> See Section VII of the AME *Doctrines and Discipline* (1817), “Of the Trial of those who think they are moved by the Holy Ghost to preach” (Allen and Tapsico 75-76). When looking at the criteria—knowledge of God and the means of salvation, holy demeanor, “gifts for the work,” etc.—the only thing missing is the pronoun “she.”

suffered a compound ankle fracture; although she eventually died of complications from the injury, Jackson was able to remove her pain through prayer. Jackson's ministrations moved the woman to ask her to speak at her funeral service in lieu of a minister (134). Finally, Jackson is able to interpret and preach from the Old Testament and the book of Revelation—texts that, according to her, other Philadelphia ministers did not seem to understand (138). These three incidents, together with many dreams and visions during the 1830s, indicate that the growth and development of Jackson's spiritual gifts drew her closer to God, but also pushed her farther away from her family and the black Methodist community.

Throughout the sections of her autotheography that concentrate on the decade between her sanctification in 1831 and her first extensive encounter with the Shakers in 1842, Jackson maintains that obstacles in her path and continuing persecution only serve to strengthen her. When her illiteracy prevented her from spiritual growth because she could not read the Bible and caused a strained relationship with her brother (he altered her wording when she dictated letters to him—"I don't want thee to *word* my letter. I only want thee to *write* it"—and he was too tired to fulfill his promise to give her reading lessons), God performed a miracle that gave her the "gift of reading" (107-108). When her husband Samuel "sought [her] life day and night," apparently reacting violently to her decision to serve God alone instead of him, she received a "gift of foresight" that allowed her to avoid him when necessary. He even asked for forgiveness, saying, "I know you are a woman of God—He has showed it unto me. I am a wicked man, but I will not hurt you now.... I never will trouble you" (145-146). God provided money for her itinerant journeys and gave her the fortitude to preach sixty-nine sermons

in four months during a prolific 1835 tour (114, 154). Even though Methodist ministers told their trustees and congregants that they would be banned from Methodist society should they give Jackson a place to preach or go to hear her, God continued to give her opportunities to speak, and many attended (152-54).

Jackson's logic is clear: against long odds, God gives her the talents necessary to pursue her calling, God teaches her interpretive skills through visions of a Shaker man who stands beside her to help her decode words and unravel difficult passages (146-147), God shows her a vision of a holy woman—dressed like a Shaker—who leads her “into the way of holiness” and a later vision of a “Mother in the Deity” (93, 154), God speaks to her and allows important Shaker texts to come her way so she can learn more details about the theological underpinnings for traveling the “self-denying path” (131, 143), and God gives her the power to “love and pray for [her] enemies” (121). Jackson sees God's continuous support everywhere, and it sustains her as she becomes a Shaker.

Yet Jackson recognizes the price she pays for her spiritual knowledge, and she shapes her text accordingly. “My dreams became a burden to my family. I shall only mention a few of them in this writing in order to show how it pleased God in His wisdom to lead a poor unlearned ignorant woman, without the aid of mortal” (100). Much later in her autotheography, when she participates for a time in séance spiritualism, Jackson seems to enact reconciliation with her husband and her brother after their deaths through encounters with their spirits (254). The fact that she continued to try to interact with her family members after their deaths shows that she could never truly leave her biological family behind spiritually, even if she separated from them physically. As we shall see, she could not leave her African-American family behind, either.



## Shouldering “The Burden of My People”

Jackson claims that her first sustained encounter with “the people called Shakers” took place in December of 1842 (162). By that time, Jackson had already spent nearly ten years as an itinerant preacher traveling through numerous towns on the East Coast, calling her listeners to a life of “full holiness.”<sup>37</sup> Since celibacy was such an important part of the Shaker Way, Jackson’s initial interactions with the Shakers and eventual residence in the Shaker settlement at Watervliet, New York, during the late 1840s and early 1850s seemed to confirm both her decade-long holiness ministry and an earlier personal conversion experience during which God sanctified her and called her to a “holy virgin life” (76-77, 137). Being with the Shakers also gave structure and meaning to numerous dreams and visions given to her by God to teach her spiritual doctrines before she was formally introduced to Shaker ideas and theology: “And although there was no mortal that I could go to and gain instruction, so it pleased God in His love and mercy to teach me in dreams and visions and revelation and gifts” (96). However, although Jackson says of her initial encounter with the Shakers, “for the first time in all my life, I have found a people to my sense that I believe to be the true people of God on earth,” she does not readily refer to the Shakers as her own people (171). Instead, Jackson reserves the phrase “my people” for her fellow African-Americans.

In a crucial passage dated March 12, 1843, Jackson explains that she felt a special “burden” for her black brothers and sisters:

Then I woke and found the burden of my people heavy upon me. I had borne a burden of my people for twelve years, but now it was double, and

---

<sup>37</sup> For a map of Jackson’s travels during her period of itinerant ministry, see Figure 7 in Humez’s introduction to *Gifts of Power* (55).

I cried unto the Lord and prayed this prayer, “Oh, Lord God of Hosts, if Thou art going to make me useful to my people, either temporal or spiritual,—for temporally they are held by their white brethren in bondage, not as bound man and bound woman, but as bought beasts, and spiritually they are held by their ministers, by the world, the flesh, and the devil. And if these are not a people in bondage, where are there any on the earth?  
(181)

Jackson’s phraseology suggests that she is combining the religious language of Shaker theology (“temporal” vs. “spiritual”) with a kind of public discourse surrounding the nature of slavery and indentured service (“not as bound man and bound woman, but as bought beasts,” 181). Born free, Jackson did not experience slavery herself. In fact, “most African Americans [in Philadelphia] were free or had freed themselves by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century; slavery continued to decline over a period of fifty years, and only eleven slaves lived in the city of Philadelphia by 1830” (Dunbar 3). Nevertheless, it is likely that Jackson was like many other Northern blacks of the period, “the majority of whom encountered slavery... in their memories, their family histories, their neighbors’ stories,” and so on (Dorsey 186). In addition, Jackson would have felt the undercurrents of a change that Bruce Dorsey describes in *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* as one of the most important shifts occurring in Philadelphia during the early nineteenth century, “the transition away from a commercial economy based on bound labor and toward a ‘free-labor’ economy rooted in industrialism” (71).

Although both white bound labor and black slavery declined sharply at the end of the eighteenth century, Dorsey emphasizes that white laborers viewed themselves as very different from black laborers engaged in similar work. “In the wake of bound labor’s demise, the concepts of *slave*, *servant*, and *dependent* still retained powerful symbolic

meanings; white laborers actively resisted using the label ‘master’ for their employers or ‘servant’ for themselves” (emphasis in original, Dorsey 7). Indeed, white male laborers wanted to clearly separate themselves from their black counterparts, as the concept of dependence was particularly racialized and gendered: “For the revolutionary generation of white men, where slave imagery permeated the ideology of independence, servitude became intertwined with dependence, slavery, and blackness. White workers clung to the label ‘freemen,’ and associated manliness with whiteness and freedom from dependence” (Dorsey 20).<sup>38</sup>

Jackson also makes an important distinction between bound labor and slavery in her explanation of the bondage of her people, saying, “for temporally they are held by their white brethren in bondage, not as bound man and bound woman, but as bought beasts” (181). In a powerful, alliterative sentence, Jackson seems to view indentured servitude—being “bound” to an employer in service for a period of years—as quite different from the conditions faced by blacks within the system of slavery, where individuals were bought and sold like “beasts.” Jackson might also be reacting to changing labor conditions for black women, for whom indentured servitude could be a slippery slope. Black women experienced indentured servitude long after black men and whites were no longer entering into such contracts. White slaveholders “used the

---

<sup>38</sup> One of the “revolutionary generation,” Thomas Paine’s words in 1776 at the beginning of the first pamphlet of *The American Crisis* resonate with the idea that independence is the absolute antithesis of slavery, and that the “tyranny” exercised by the British via unwarranted taxation and occupation stands opposed to liberty: “Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (*not only to TAX*) but ‘*to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER,*’ and if being *bound in that manner*, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth” (emphasis in original, 71). Jackson’s words seem to resonate with Paine’s, although they sound different coming from a black woman concerned with the spiritual and physical welfare of her people: “And if these are not a people in bondage, where are there any on the earth?” (Jackson 181).

[indentured] system to hold on to their human property”; they were particularly loath to part with black female domestics (Dunbar 4, 36-37).

Yet the physical conditions of enslavement are not all that concerns Jackson. She goes on to describe the spiritual perils also faced by her people: “spiritually they are held by their ministers, by the world, the flesh, and the devil” (181). In this instance, Jackson betrays her true feelings about Christian ministers who would not preach or practice a “testimony against all sin,” i.e., celibacy as a crucial part of holiness living (103). Both the “world” of non-Shaker Christians *and* the non-Christian “world” could lead her people astray. Wanting to alleviate both their temporal and spiritual bondage, Jackson is ready to stand with her people against “the world.”<sup>39</sup>

As the above reading suggests, Jackson uses Shaker phraseology and theology in ways that her white Shaker contemporaries might not have expected. Within the context of a Shaker community, the daily pursuit of holiness was a profoundly transformative experience for Jackson, one that she thought might also transform the racial consciousness of her white Shaker contemporaries. She seems puzzled by their insularity, disoriented by their lack of desire to pursue the ethical imperative presented by their knowledge of the way to salvation, and frustrated that their leaders do not give her official permission to start her own Shaker family the first time she asks (216, 220-221,

---

<sup>39</sup> White Shakers also viewed slavery as detrimental to spiritual development, particularly for white Shaker converts who were used to seeing blacks as servants and who did not want to engage in activities (even such as cleaning) that could be perceived as work that should be done by slaves. In an 1818 letter from Molly Goodrich of the South Union, Kentucky, Shaker family to an important Shaker theologian, Goodrich gives her take on the difference “between a free country and a slave country”:

You may be sure the difference is very great in almost every respect. It is a great deal harder to bring them to a sense of their duty and to really feel interested in things either spiritual or temporal, as the people of the East do! It seems sometimes as though the very air, so to speak, was impregnated with that careless, idle, indifferent spirit which is imbibed into creatures through that sense of slavery. It feels a heap harder to them to be really industrious, neat, and clean, and to be really subject and obedient to what they are taught. (Goodrich, Letter 14, dated Nov. 22, 1818; qtd. in Humez, *Mother's First-born Daughters* 180)

249). (Jackson eventually received a blessing from Eldress Paulina Bates, her spiritual leader at Watervliet, to found a Philadelphia Shaker community.) Jackson posits that a more direct feedback loop between the Shakers and “the world” must exist in order to explain Shaker belief that, in language attributed to Mother Ann Lee, “you must forsake the marriage of the flesh, and travel out of it, in order to be married to the Lamb; which is, to be married to Christ, or, joined to the Lord in one spirit” (Mother Lucy Wright, Giles Avery, ed., *Precepts* 240, qtd. in Whitson: 163). Jackson believed that joining with Christ in such a unifying spirit could break the temporal and spiritual bonds of her people.

Perhaps Jackson’s concerns prefigure the crumbling of Shaker communities toward the end of the nineteenth century, a dwindling of numbers that was due at least in part to a lack of sustained witnessing to the outside “world.” (The fact that the Shakers were celibate and had no biological offspring to indoctrinate with their beliefs did not help matters, either.) Jackson’s concerns also might make us question whether or not a strict binary between the “world” and the holy was really necessary for Shaker theology. Either way, Jackson seems to have believed in the importance of communal living, the chance for believers to reinforce the distinction of the call to holiness, to give a spiritual charge to the believer, to remind the believer of necessary sacrifice, and to feel part of a select, chosen group wherein “the saints were responsible for forming communities that fostered collective sacred experience and protected members from profanation” (Marini 14).

A feeling of spiritual responsibility finally led Jackson to form an urban Shaker family in Philadelphia, a largely black and female space where individual sacred

experiences had the potential to strengthen a collective communal identity and intimate relationship to the Deity (both Father God and Holy Mother Wisdom). Contemporary feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has noted that such communities are powerful spaces in which to relate experiences like conversion and other gifts of the spirit: “Revelatory, transformative experiences (conversion) disclose the original humanity and allow one to liberate oneself from the sinful distortion of existence. This new humanity is then related to a redemptive community that gathers together and announces a prophetic, critical, or transformative mission against sinful society” (38). Although we do not know much about the details of what Jackson’s Shaker family did in terms of its mission to the surrounding Philadelphia neighborhood—Jackson’s autobiographical narrative stops in 1864, about seven years before her death, and there are not many Shaker records that discuss the Philadelphia family—it is nevertheless very significant that Jackson felt it was imperative to form a community in a city that she seemed conflicted about staying in immediately after her sanctification, becoming a prophet who returns to her own people and to the hometown that previously made her feel unwelcome.<sup>40</sup>

In an entry dated March 26, 1843, Jackson again describes her ministerial calling in terms of biblical prophets: “As I got out of bed these words were spoken to me, ‘I have chosen thee to me, as I did Jeremiah and Ezekiel to speak to the house of Israel. So have I chosen thee to speak to this people. Be careful how thou does it’” (183).<sup>41</sup> She later continues on the theme of being chosen to lead her people in Philadelphia, specifically. In a poetic, prophetic section of her autotheography with the heading “The Resurrection,”

---

<sup>40</sup> See Humez’s introduction to *Gifts of Power* for a few “interesting glimpses of the Philadelphia family” after Jackson’s death, drawn from Shaker records (40-41).

<sup>41</sup> See Glaude’s discussion of “race and the ideology of chosenness” in *Exodus!* (76).

Jackson allows the reader to hear the voice of God as she heard it, calling her to rise out of her “nature” (that is, a fallen, sinful nature embodied in human generation, or sexual relations) into “the nature of...Jesus Christ” (189). Jackson records the words God said to her:

“I have chosen thee as one of my witnesses, and that is the reason I called thee out of Egypt by thunder and lightning. And in Philadelphia, that wicked city where thou had no one to speak to that knowed me or my Son, yea, I led thee by a way thou knowest not of. Yet thou believed me and followed me on, until I had sent thee my Son. And He will go on with thee the wilderness through, and bring thee out with shoutings of joy. And thee will be glad that thou ever knowed me, thy Lord and thy God.” (190)

According to Jackson, a baptism of the Holy Spirit followed, much like the New Testament Pentecost (191).<sup>42</sup> At this point in her writings, Jackson makes it clear that she sees a direct through-line from her initial conversion (being first “called...out of Egypt by thunder and lightning”) to her eventual mission in Philadelphia. As she constructs it, if she is willing to “pray to die to” the flesh and her own understanding, she will be given gifts of power through which to experience the divine in her own life and be a witness to others (190).

Jackson also found a female companion to join her in witnessing, a younger black woman named Rebecca Perot who furthered Jackson’s legacy after her death by taking her name, “Mother Rebecca Jackson” (Humez, *Gifts of Power* 39). Indeed, “the two Rebeccas’” were inseparable, probably living together both during their residence(s) at Watervliet and in their intermittent stays in Philadelphia before Jackson permanently established her Shaker family there (Humez, *Gifts of Power* 28). It is provocative to think about the close relationship between these two women in the context of the revelatory community of Jackson’s Shaker family and the larger African-American community in

---

<sup>42</sup> See Acts 2.

Philadelphia at the time. As in the Doukhobor culture in Canada studied by Julie Rak in *Negotiated Memory*, Shakers also potentially pushed the boundaries of what constitutes “the self” by creating a kind of communal subjectivity. In such communities, “salvation is part of everyday living: it does not come from a divine source outside people but from a divine source found in others” (Rak 1).

On one hand, it is radical to think about Jackson and other black women finding the divine in one another, particularly as they readily (and often daily) confessed their sins to each another as part of the rituals of communal holiness living.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, considering the fractious tendencies Jackson displays throughout her writings, constructing herself as a unique spiritual force in opposition to established forms of religion (doctrines, modes of worship, other religious leaders, etc.), it might be too simplistic to project a communal subjectivity onto her. Jackson’s fluid, visionary subjectivity allows her to cross physical and spiritual boundaries throughout her writings, but mostly for the purpose of being enveloped by and engrossed in her Holy Mother and Father. Ultimately, Jackson’s rigorously-maintained spiritual senses are textually trained on the divine.

---

<sup>43</sup> The potential for a near-erotic spiritual (and even physical) connection between “the two Rebeccas” should not be lost on us, despite their soteriology of celibacy. For more on the erotic possibilities of intimate friendships and homosocial networks, see Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual.” For more on the subversive and stimulating possibilities of Shaker spirituality for women, see McCully, “Oh I Love Mother, I Love Her Power.”



## Works Cited

- Allen, Richard. *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. Philadelphia, 1833. *Documenting the American South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2000. Web. 23 July 2010.
- Allen, Richard, and Jacob Tapsico. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Philadelphia, 1817. *Documenting the American South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2001. Web. 2 June 2009.
- Bainbridge, William Sims. "Shaker Demographics 1840-1900: An Example of the Use of U.S. Census Enumeration." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21.4 (1982): 352-365. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Apr. 2009.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2nd ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997. Print.
- Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989. Print.
- Brewer, Priscilla J. *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1986. Print.
- . "'Tho' of the Weaker Sex': A Reassessment of Gender Equality among the Shakers." *Signs* 17.3 (1992): 609-635. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 June 2010.
- Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Ed. W. R. Owens. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Campbell, D'Ann. "Women's Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised—1810 to 1860." *New England Quarterly* 51.1 (1978): 23-38. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Apr. 2009.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettie. *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Davey, Michaela. *Mastering Theology*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. Print.
- Deignan, Kathleen. *Christ Spirit: The Eschatology of Shaker Christianity*. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1992. Print.
- Dodson, Jualynne E. *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church*. New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2002. Print.

- Dorsey, Bruce. *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Intro. Kwame Anthony Appiah. New York: Modern Library, 2000. 1-113. Print.
- Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008. Print.
- Foote, Julia A. J. *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*. 1879. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 161-234. Print.
- Foster, Frances Smith. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*. 2nd ed. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994. Print.
- Foster, Lawrence. *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1991. Print.
- Frey, Sylvia R., and Betty Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998. Print.
- Glaude, Jr., Eddie S. *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. Print.
- Grammer, Elizabeth Elkin. *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- [Green, Calvin, and Seth Y. Wells]. *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers*. Albany, 1823. *Google Book Search*. Web. 18 Feb. 2009.
- Hempton, David. *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2005. Print.
- The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1972. Print.
- Humez, Jean McMahon, ed. Introduction. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1981. 1-64. Print.
- , ed. *Mother's First-born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.

- Jackson, Rebecca Cox. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*. Ed. Jean McMahon Humez. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1981. Print.
- Kitch, Sally L. *Chaste Liberation: Celibacy and Female Cultural Status*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989. Print.
- Lapsansky, Emma Jones. "‘Since They Got Those Separate Churches’: Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia." *American Quarterly* 32.1 (1980): 54-78. Rpt. in *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives*. Ed. Joe William Trotter, Jr., and Eric Ledell Smith. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997. 93-120. Print.
- Madden, Etta M. "Reading, Writing, Race, and Mother Imagery: The Literacies of Rebecca Cox Jackson and Alonzo Giles Hollister." *Bodies of Life: Shaker Literature and Literacies*. Westport: Greenwood, 1998. 93-123. Print.
- Marini, Stephen A. *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982. Print.
- McCully, Susan. "Oh I Love Mother, I Love Her Power: Shaker Spirit Possession and the Performance of Desire." *Theatre Survey* 35.1 (May 1994): 88-98. Print.
- Mercadante, Linda A. *Gender, Doctrine, and God: The Shakers and Contemporary Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990. Print.
- Miller, Jon. *The Social Control of Religious Zeal: A Study of Organizational Contradictions*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994. Print.
- The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. 3rd ed. Michael D. Coogan, gen. ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Newman, Richard S. *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*. New York: New York UP, 2008. Print.
- Olney, James. "‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *Callaloo* 20 (Winter 1984): 46-73. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 June 2010.
- Paine, Thomas. "Number I" of *The Crisis*. In *Common Sense, Rights of Man, and Other Essential Writings of Thomas Paine*. New York: Penguin, 2003. 71-80. Print.
- Rak, Julie. *Negotiated Memory: Doukhorbor Autobiographical Discourse*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2004. Print.

- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon, 1983. Print.
- Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village*. Home page. United Society of Shakers, n.d. Web. 13 Aug. 2010.
- “Sackcloth.” *An American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster; Thoroughly Revised and Greatly Enlarged and Improved, by Chauncey A. Goodrich and Noah Porter*. 1877. Print.
- Sasson, Diane. *The Shaker Spiritual Narrative*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1983. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Where I’m Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*. Westport: Greenwood, 1974. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. Print.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America.” *Signs* 1.1 (1975): 1-29. Rpt. in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. 53-76. Print.
- Stein, Stephen J. *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992. Print.
- Wesley, John. “Justification by Faith.” *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1 (Sermons I, 1-33). Ed. Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1984. 182-199. Print.
- Whitson, Robley Edward, ed. and intro. *The Shakers: Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection*. New York: Paulist, 1983. Print.
- “Worldly.” Def. 2. *An American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster; Thoroughly Revised and Greatly Enlarged and Improved, by Chauncey A. Goodrich and Noah Porter*. 1877. Print.

## CHAPTER 4

### Frances E. W. Harper's Poetic Vocation: Unitarian Theology and Archetypes of Leadership in *Moses: A Story of the Nile* and Other Selected Poems on Slavery, Temperance, and Spirituality

*Feeling that she was bought with a price, she realized that she was not her own, but the captive of Divine Love, and that her talents were not given her to hide beneath a bushel or to use for merely selfish enjoyments. That her time was not her own to be frittered away by the demands of fashion or to be spent in unavailing regrets. Every reform which had for its object the lessening of human misery, or the increase of human happiness, found in her an earnest ally.*

—Frances E. W. Harper  
from *Sowing and Reaping: A Temperance Story* (123)<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1860s, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper—a freeborn, middle-class, educated black woman from the North who had already established her reputation as an outstanding lecturer on the antislavery circuit and published numerous poems, essays, and speeches—embarked on a Southern lecture tour with the theme, “Literacy, Land and Liberation” (Boyd 120).<sup>2</sup> Her letters from this period indicate that she traveled “almost constantly” across states such as South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, lecturing frequently to black and white audiences of all ages and both sexes in many different

---

<sup>1</sup> Harper’s uses two biblical references in this passage: “bought with a price” (see 1 Cor. 6.20 and 7.23) and “hide beneath a bushel” (see Matt. 5.15, Mark 4.21, Luke 11.33).

<sup>2</sup> My description of Harper’s work during this period is based on her letters from 1867-1871 and the accounts of her Southern lecture tour(s) related in Melba Joyce Boyd’s *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911* (119-126) and *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (121-134).

venues, particularly Sunday schools and newly-established schools for freepersons (*Brighter* 126). She saw firsthand the awful aftermath of the Civil War, including widespread poverty for ex-slaves and poor whites alike, the continued violence of rebel sympathizers and the burgeoning Ku Klux Klan, and even the “thickened graves” from what she calls “that modern Golgotha,” the stockade at Florence, South Carolina, where Union soldiers were imprisoned by the Confederates at the end of the war (*Brighter* 124-125, 202).

Harper distilled her Reconstruction lecture tour experiences into poetic form in *Sketches of Southern Life*, first published in 1872. Although short, this book contains some of her most famous poems, a series with a first-person speaker named “Aunt Chloe.” Significantly, these poems seem to draw on the slave narrative tradition, depicting the horrors of slavery and the humanity of those enslaved; the characters speak in a kind of black dialect, but without being reduced to stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> Although these poems are set during Reconstruction, Aunt Chloe’s memories of the depravity of slavery, the trials of the Civil War, and the joys of emancipation are as fresh as ever. Claiming, “I don’t know very much / About . . . politics,” Chloe is actually quite sharp on the topic of voting rights, and despite her age (“rising sixty”), she learns to read “The hymns and Testament” (*Brighter* 204, 206).<sup>4</sup> By creating the Aunt Chloe character, Harper was able

---

<sup>3</sup> Critics have noted that Harper’s dialect-like verse puts her “in the forefront of the local color movement” (Foster, *Brighter* 137). Following J. Saunders Redding, Frances Smith Foster asserts that “Harper’s language . . . is more appropriately recognized . . . as ‘dialectical patterns’ . . . Eschewing misspellings and linguistic signals that befuddle the reader and constrain the speaker within preconstructed dialectical boundaries of pathos and humor, Frances Harper avoided the problems that ensnared Paul Laurence Dunbar and worried James Weldon Johnson” (*Written* 152). Harper does not seem to have modeled her “dialect” verse on examples from her contemporaries, but rather created her own version of black speech (Boyd 151).

<sup>4</sup> All poetic citations are taken from *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster. As Foster did not include line numbers to organize Harper’s poetry,

to draw on her encounters with former slaves while voicing some of her own political and theological concerns. Using Chloe as a mouthpiece, Harper could ask difficult theological questions (“If God is good and just, / How it happened that the masters / Did grind us to the dust,” *Brighter* 200) and make credible claims about the consequences of slavery.<sup>5</sup>

The Aunt Chloe sequence is just one example of Harper’s continuing preoccupation with slavery after emancipation.<sup>6</sup> As suggested in one of her letters published on August 10, 1867, in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Harper knew that the slave past was a “shadow” that might threaten the future: “The South is a sad place, it is so rife with mournful memories and sad revelations of the past. Here you listen to heart-saddening stories of grievous old wrongs, for the shadows of the past have not been fully lifted from the minds of the former victims of slavery” (*Brighter* 124). Nevertheless, Harper was hopeful: “...for the shadows bear the promise of a brighter coming day” (*Brighter* 124). In order to get to that brighter day, however, there was much work to be done. For Harper, that meant everything from lecturing for free and, in her words, “roughing it in the bush” to agitating for black suffrage, women’s rights, and temperance reform (*Brighter* 134; Boyd 202). Operating through a Christian framework with Unitarian theology, Harper believed that Christian precepts could transform the sinful life

---

citations will be delineated in a parenthetical manner throughout the body of this chapter, as follows: (*Brighter* [page number]).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the “issue of *theodicy*, the justification of a loving and powerful God that allows evil and injustice to exist” (Floyd-Thomas 81), see Anthony Pinn, *Why, Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explains how Harper used religious language to communicate shared aims with her fellow African-Americans after emancipation:

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper...insisted that the role of African-American women involved an assertive and persistent solidarity with their communities. They also pointed to a strength and pride that emerged from African-American women’s resistance to the slave experience. Harper in particular asserted that in the process of adjusting to the social change associated with the new experience of freedom, African-American women drew upon their experiences in slavery as a source of militant solidarity evinced by African-American women of all backgrounds, and particularly privileged ones. Often that solidarity was expressed in the language of religious covenant and Christian mission. (82)

of the individual and revolutionize corrupt social relationships.

Specifically, Harper was concerned about two types of sin that could jeopardize the individual and damage society: the “galling chain” of slavery, and the dangers of alcoholism, or “the bondage of the bowl” (*Brighter* 176, 259). In Harper’s poetry, Christ has the power to rend these chains, and she encourages others to have their fetters broken by embracing Christian faith and model their lives on exemplary biblical figures like the Syrophenician woman, Ruth, Vashti, Moses, and Jesus himself. While she does not present complex doctrinal systems like Julia Foote (sanctification/Methodism), Rebecca Cox Jackson (celibacy/Shakerism), or Zilpha Elaw (ecumenical holiness), Harper nevertheless impresses upon her readers the importance of holy living. Her “I”-voiced poetry allows for a kind of practical narrative theology, a clear-cut guide to salvation from what Harper called the “twin evils of slavery and intemperance” (*Brighter* 281). Her poems were meant to inspire others—her fellow African-Americans in particular—to take up positions of spiritual and political leadership.

In this chapter, I will address archetypes for leadership presented in *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (which is extant in three editions: 1869, 1889, and 1893). When examining these *Moses* collections, it is important to keep in mind that Harper seems to have taken more control over the publication and distribution of her work in the latter part of the nineteenth century; Harper often added new poems or essays to each collection when releasing new editions of her books (Foster, *Brighter* 235). As Frances Smith Foster notes, most of Harper’s new poems during this period are either “retellings of biblical stories” or “paeans to temperance” (*Brighter* 236). Effectively, Harper encourages her readers to find connections between her poems about slavery reprinted



from earlier editions and new pieces that seem to define her poetic vocation and spiritual commission.

The *Moses* collections are a good example of poetic accretion from one edition to another. The first extant copy of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, published in 1869, included only one piece in addition to the epic poem about Moses: “The Mission of the Flowers,” a short fable about a rose tree who feels so blessed to be a rose that she wishes that all the other flowering plants would turn into roses, too, not realizing that her “sister flowers” also have “their own missions” (Harper, *Brighter* 232).<sup>7</sup> The 1889 volume of *Moses* expanded the 1869 edition with the addition of two temperance poems, “The Ragged Stocking” and “The Fatal Pledge.” Finally, in 1893, Harper added five more poems to *Moses*, all of which focused on biblical stories that reveal her Christology: “Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem,” “The Resurrection of Jesus,” “Simon’s Countrymen,” “Deliverance,” and “Simon’s Feast.”

Before addressing Harper’s models of leadership in *Moses*, however, I will first discuss Harper’s poetic project as a moral, theological, and autobiographical one. In order to understand Harper’s poetry as *auto/theo/graphy*, or self/God/writing, we need to examine Harper’s view of her literary vocation, interrogating the relationship between her method and message. Why was much of Harper’s poetry so direct and plain-spoken, when her spiritual and political concerns were complex and demanding? The answer can be found in three aspects of Harper’s theological concerns: a belief in the intelligibility of the Bible; an understanding of sin as dangerous and predictable; and an emphasis on (both masculine and feminine) leadership models that could inspire holy living and

---

<sup>7</sup> The first extant copy of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, published in 1869, is marked “2d ed.” It is unclear when the first edition of *Moses* was published, but Frances Smith Foster doubts that Harper wrote *Moses* before 1865 (*Brighter* 138).

combat sin, often in the service of racial uplift.

### Harper's Poetic Vocation

To grasp the spiritual elements of Harper's literary and activist calling, let us examine a poem that substantiates the hypothesis that Harper often added poems treating biblical themes, temperance, or her vocation to earlier volumes of her poetry that dealt heavily with the subject of slavery. Consider "'Fishers of Men,'" one of the poems added to *Sketches of Southern Life* for the 1886 edition—fourteen years after the first edition was published. The poem begins with the speaker recalling a visionary state:

I had a dream, a varied dream:  
Before my ravished sight  
The city of my Lord arose,  
With all its love and light. (*Brighter* 253)

Using the word "ravished" in the sense of spiritual transport, Harper demonstrates that this speaker is seeing through a wondrous, God-given vision that allows her to go beyond the physical senses and tap into the spiritual world.<sup>8</sup> Like John, the speaker of the biblical book of Revelation who was transported through prophetic ecstasy and found himself before the heavenly city of the new Jerusalem, Harper's speaker finds herself before the "gates of light," ready to enter heaven.<sup>9</sup> Just as she is about to go through the gates, she hears an agonizing cry:

I turned, and saw behind me surge

---

<sup>8</sup> Webster's 1877 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defines "ravish" as follows: "to bear away with joy or delight; to delight to ecstasy; to transport" ("Ravish," def. 2).

<sup>9</sup> In the first chapter of Revelation, John says, "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet..." (Rev. 1.10, NRSV). For John's vision of the new Jerusalem, see Revelation 21.1-22.5. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 3rd ed. (edited by Coogan).

A wild and stormy sea;  
And drowning men were reaching out  
Imploring hands to me. (*Brighter* 253-54)

The anguished moans of these imperiled men seem to drown out the harps of the holy city. Turning to her angel guide, the speaker asks that she be allowed to return to earth and help “these wretched ones, / So wrecked and desolate” (*Brighter* 254). Although the angel reminds her that going back will be difficult, the speaker is resolved. As she puts her back to heaven and faces the turbulent sea, her decision is rewarded:

I turned to go, but as I turned  
The gloomy sea grew bright,  
And from my heart there seemed to flow  
Ten thousand cords of light.

And sin-wrecked men, with eager hands,  
Did grasp each golden cord;  
And with my heart I drew them on  
To see my gracious Lord. (*Brighter* 254)

The streams of light pouring from the speaker’s chest become lifelines for the drowning. This imagery is striking, and Harper’s speaker becomes a hero—with powers approaching that of a superhero—as her heartstrings pull others to safety. In the final stanza of this poem, the speaker again stands at heaven’s gates, this time with a “rescued throng” beside her, all of whom will enter the holy city (*Brighter* 254).

“Fishers of Men” is an unusual piece for Harper. Although many of her poems include an “I”-voiced speaker depicting biblical stories or dramatic (and pathetic) scenes, they do not often include visions, dreamscapes, prophecies, and otherworldly impressions; instead, Harper’s poetry is rather straightforward and didactic. So why does Harper use such remarkable imagery in this poem? What is the significance of crafting a speaker who becomes, in the words of Jesus calling his first disciples to leave their

fishing nets and follow him instead, a “fisher of men”?<sup>10</sup>

I contend that this poem can be understood as an autobiographical exploration of Harper’s discipleship, one of many examples from her poetry where the experiences, emotions, and beliefs of an “I”-voiced speaker seem to align with Harper’s own knowledge and views. In this case, the “varied dream” related by the speaker of “Fishers of Men” can be read as an allegory about Harper’s spiritual calling. She cannot ignore the cries of those in distress, whether the “bitter shrieks” of an enslaved woman whose child has been sold away from her (e.g. “The Slave Mother,” *Brighter* 59), the whimpers of a young boy terrified of his drunken father (e.g. “Signing the Pledge,” *Brighter* 255), or the sighs of a woman whose husband playfully mocks her desire for the vote (“John and Jacob—A Dialogue on Woman’s Rights,” *Brighter* 240). Her poems convey a kind of accessible, everyday theology in relation to important life events, both spiritual events (the return of a prodigal son, signing a temperance pledge, Jesus’ resurrection, etc.) as well as social and political ones (the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, the Emancipation Proclamation, commemorating the centennial of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, etc.). For Harper, poetry is a tool of both self-expression and conversion, a way to rhetorically strengthen her relationship with the divine while pleading for the reader to take up her (and her Lord’s) cause. Though Harper did not write an autobiography and left behind no journals to tell the story of her life and work, we can glimpse her *autotheographical* process by turning to her “I”-voiced poems. When read alongside her letters, essays, and prose fiction, we can piece together the elements

---

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 4.18-22, Mark 1.16-20, and Luke 5.1-11.

that motivated her poetic vocation and pragmatic theological approach.<sup>11</sup>

Reading Harper's poetry in light of the "autotheographical" conventions I have been establishing throughout this dissertation may seem unusual, even though much of her poetry contains an "I" speaker in a mode reminiscent of the self-referential but God-centered conversion narratives of conventional spiritual autobiographies in prose.<sup>12</sup> Her "I"-voiced poems provide the opportunity to think about autotheography as more than just a subgenre of spiritual autobiography. In fact, Harper's poetry reinforces one of the central aspects of my definition of autotheography: the believer/writer participating in a process of continual revelation and increasing holiness in herself and others. Through this process (for Harper, a poetic process), a textual relationship between the divine, the believer/writer (through the speaker/supplicant wielded by that writer), and the reader/convert develops over time across multiple poems.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Harper's poetic project seems to underscore the notion that personal salvation and social reform can—and should—go together. The reader's potential to experience personal transformation (whether conversion to Christ or to a social cause) through reading a poem also involves the potential to become a social actor, a change agent in the material world. Harper continuously modeled the ways in which activism

---

<sup>11</sup> As Frances Smith Foster explains, "from her earliest writings, Harper advocated a life in which the personal and the public were merged in an effort to realize the moral, social, and economic development of society. Her literature was an essential tool to that end, and it is her literature that must, finally, serve as her presentation of self" (*Brighter* 23).

<sup>12</sup> Carla Peterson notes, "Watkins Harper occasionally and particularly in the postbellum period accompanied her lectures with recitations of her poetry, which she also collected in volumes for publication and sold at the close of her lectures" (122). According to Peterson, this method of distribution places Harper firmly in the African-American autobiographical tradition: "just as other African-American writers sold their slave narratives or spiritual autobiographies after delivering antislavery speeches or sermons, so Watkins Harper sold her books of poems to the audiences that had come to hear her lecture. In this sense her poetry can be interpreted as autobiography, as an indirect account of individual life" (128).

<sup>13</sup> In her recent study *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry*, F. Elizabeth Gray explains that this kind of "triangulated" textual relationship is crucial to the operation of devotional lyric poems: "the individual speaker's relationship with God, the primary focus, is triangulated by the speaker's relationship with his or her readers and co-believers—an unignorable secondary focus" (138-139).

follows personal dedication to Christ in her literature and in her own life.<sup>14</sup> Before her marriage to Fenton Harper in 1860 at the age of 35, Frances Watkins worked as a teacher in Ohio and Pennsylvania and toured across New England and parts of the Midwest as an antislavery lecturer. She started to publish poems in earnest in the 1850s (*Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* was first published in 1854), and she began publishing fiction in 1859 with her short story “The Two Offers.”<sup>15</sup> Though she cut back on her public activities somewhat during her four-year marriage, she resumed her lecturing career shortly after her husband’s death, probably with their daughter Mary in tow. In the 1870s, after her Southern tour, Harper and Mary settled in Philadelphia, and Harper joined the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia (Floyd-Thomas 69).<sup>16</sup> Harper was instrumental to numerous activist organizations at the end of the century, becoming a leader in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the National Association of Colored Women (to name just two). She also continued to publish essays, poetry, and fiction. In addition to reprints of earlier poetry volumes like *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869) and *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872) and new poetry collections such as *Atlanta Offerings: Poems* (1895), she published three serialized novels in periodicals such as the *Christian Recorder* (the organ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church), as well as the novel *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), before her death in 1911.

---

<sup>14</sup> For a good overview of Harper’s biography that draws on a number of sources, including the oft-referenced *Still’s Underground Rail Road Records* (first published 1871), see Sherman (62-66). Also see Foster’s introduction to *A Brighter Coming Day* and biographical details throughout Boyd’s *Discarded Legacy*.

<sup>15</sup> William Lloyd Garrison wrote a preface for Harper’s *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, which became “an immediate success, selling more than ten thousand copies and meriting reprinting in an enlarged version within three years. During Harper’s lifetime the collection was reprinted at least twenty times” (Gates and McKay 409). Harper’s tale “The Two Offers” is often regarded as “the first short story published by an African-American” (Foster, *Brighter* 105).

<sup>16</sup> As she got older, Mary seems to have followed in her mother’s footsteps, working alongside Harper as she lectured, taught, worked as an organizer, and promoted political causes. Mary passed away in 1909, two years before her mother’s death.

In light of her literary and activist objectives, Harper's adoption of Unitarianism makes sense. In particular, one aspect of Unitarian theology involving the "Arminian concept of free will and free moral agency" seems to have informed Harper's vocation, bringing together her literature and social reform work: the idea that "sin, disorder, and social evil would disappear if everyone would choose good, make unselfish choices, and convince everyone else to do likewise" (Hardesty 34). Harper saw her literary production as crucial to influencing others to make good choices that would better society. More specifically, as many of her writings attest, Harper fashioned her poems into tools for racial uplift, encouraging her fellow African-Americans to adopt virtuous behaviors.

As an apt illustration of Harper's conception of poetry as a medium for racial uplift, consider one of Harper's pieces of short fiction published in 1873 in the *Christian Recorder*, "Fancy Etchings," which contains a dialogue between a young woman, Jenny, and her aunt. Although Jenny is a fictional character, it is easy to imagine her words in the mouth of a youthful Harper, proclaiming her desire to be a poet (Foster, *Brighter* 224). For Jenny, poetry is a calling that will prove "the best way to serve humanity" while developing her own mental and spiritual faculties. When her aunt questions whether or not poetry will really make an impact on her fellow African-Americans, considering that many of them are overburdened with work, having little time to devote to such "songs," Jenny replies:

"It is just because our lives are apt to be so hard and dry, that I would scatter the flowers of poetry around our paths; and would if I could amid life's sad discords introduce the most entrancing strains of melody. I would teach men and women to love noble deeds by setting them to the music, of fitly spoken words. The first throb of interest that a person feels in the recital of a noble deed, a deed of high and holy worth, the first glow of admiration for suffering virtue, or thrill of joy in the triumph of goodness, forms the dividing line between the sensuous and material and

the spiritual and progressive. I think poetry is one of the great agents of culture, civilization and refinement.” (*Brighter* 225)

This passage is one of the most straightforward presentations of Harper’s understanding of her literary vocation, defined in both poetic and spiritual terms. In Jenny’s words, we can see Harper’s endeavor ““...to teach others to strive to make the highest ideal, the most truly real of our lives,”” holding up instructive examples of human frailty and integrity, wickedness and righteousness, in order to teach her readers to choose the good—and to choose to align their personal and religious goals with those of the race (*Brighter* 225). Jenny’s elucidation of the moral and social function of poetry in “Fancy Etchings” shows that the “I” of Harper’s own experience can translate into the “I” of imagined life events for her characters (in this case, an important conversation between Jenny and her aunt), in turn allowing readers to inhabit and be inspired by the emotions of this complex “I” position. In short, Harper’s “I” and the speaker’s “I” entwine, and the reader’s “I” is implicated through the act of “speaking” (that is, reading) this “I.”

A second example of how entwined “I” voices function in Harper’s work to persuade the reader can be found in another poem that was added to *Sketches of Southern Life* for the 1886 edition: “Nothing and Something.” Temperance was one of the most important causes animating Harper’s activism and literature, particularly during the time period discussed in this chapter that coincided with Harper’s membership in the Unitarian Church.<sup>17</sup> “Nothing and Something” is typical of Harper’s temperance poetry in that it relies on the power of first-person narration to illustrate the life-altering—and often life-

---

<sup>17</sup> For more on Harper’s temperance views and participation in the temperance movement, see her 1888 essay “The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and the Colored Woman” (*Brighter* 281-285). For more on Harper’s role in the WCTU and racial tensions in that organization, see Mattingly (85-95). Also see Bordin (82-85, 159-160) for additional information on the participation of black women in the temperance movement.



threatening—consequences of liquor consumption, both for the (always male) alcohol abuser and for those around him (usually his wife and children). But the brilliance of this particular poem lies in the fact that five different “I” voices come together, each telling a story that seems interconnected with the others. These connections are made thematically across the narrative arc of the poem, as well as through regular meter and repetitive rhyme schemes.

The poem consists of six stanzas of eight lines each (although the final stanza is divided into two parts). Except for the last one, each stanza begins with four lines in the voice of a first-person speaker, saying, “It is nothing to me . . .,” followed by a bold proclamation indicating that alcohol could never affect his/her life. The remaining four lines of the stanza are voiced by an omniscient third-person narrator telling of the hardship that later befell the first-person speaker of the previous lines, proving that the “nothing” of intemperance turned out to be “something” after all. To see the “dialogue” that takes place in each stanza, alternating between a first-person speaker and the third-person narrator, take the second stanza as an example:

It is nothing to me, the mother said;  
I have no fear that my boy will tread  
In the downward path of sin and shame,  
And crush my heart and darken his name.  
It was something to her when that only son  
From the path of right was early won,  
And madly cast in the flowing bowl  
A ruined body and sin-wrecked soul. (*Brighter* 251)

The effect of hearing multiple speakers, one after the other, whose stories end in disaster, is a powerful feeling of inevitable dread. All of the characters are caught up in the vicious circle of intemperance: the beautiful, grief-stricken young woman who fears the “staggering tread” of her alcoholic husband, the mother whose son becomes a drunkard

(above), the young man whose drinking leads to imprisonment and separation from his family, the merchant unconcerned about selling liquor who later hears that his wife and child are dead because of the carelessness of a “drunken [train] conductor,” and finally the man who “gave his vote for the liquor trade,” completing the circle when his daughter marries an alcoholic (presumably the beauty from the first stanza). As already mentioned, the sense of inevitability is heightened by the extremely regular meter (iambic tetrameter) and predictable rhymes that are paired every two lines and reoccur throughout the poem (for instance, “said,” “head,” “dread,” and “tread” all appear more than once). Yet these seemingly simplistic devices are not because Harper lacked talent or did not want to experiment with verse forms.

In fact, this poem is a prime example of Harper’s literary agenda. It can be seen as a devotional piece, a story full of pathos with lines that are easy to recall—something a reader could return to again and again. The force of this poem lies in repetition, and the inevitable rhymes are a device illustrating the trap of sin that it is easy to fall into. Only the last stanza (divided into two parts, a four-line question followed by a four-line answer) can break the cycle of grinding “a grist of sin” as the third-person narrator steps into the first-person speaker role, inviting readers into the story of the poem by using the word “us,” asking, “Is it nothing for us to idly sleep / While the cohorts of death their vigils keep?” The speaker authoritatively answers her own question in the last four lines:

It is something, yes, all, for us to stand  
Clasping by faith our Saviour’s hand;  
To learn to labor, live and fight  
On the side of God and changeless light. (*Brighter* 252)

The spondee in the middle of the first line of the final quatrain (“yes, all”) adds an extra stress to the line, the only time in the entire poem where one line contains five strong

stresses. This variation is significant; Harper is emphasizing just how important it is to join the temperance “fight.” It is more than “something,” the speaker suggests. It is everything. In the logic of the poem, choosing temperance means choosing the right side of the battle, the side of God and Jesus. The speaker seems to assume that her readers are already Christians (“Clasping by faith *our* Saviour’s hand,” emphasis added), but that they do not realize the extent of the damage that intemperance can wreak. Harper uses poems like “Nothing and Something” to convert her readers to the temperance cause.

In fact, most of Harper’s poems are truth-conveying simple stories meant to convert her readers in some fashion. They often function like popular religious tracts and newspapers such as those published by the American Tract Society (ATS) during the nineteenth century: “‘simple, evangelical narratives, which unfold the plan of salvation to plain minds’” (editors of the ATS’s *American Messenger*, qtd. in Nord: 121).<sup>18</sup>

Alternatively, as already mentioned, Harper’s poems could serve a devotional purpose, much like nineteenth-century hymn collections (hymn texts without tunes) that could be used for private meditation (Hobbs 34).<sup>19</sup> Of course, hymns could also be a form of public worship. Carla Peterson points out that, “like other contemporary Unitarians and abolitionists such as Lowell, Longfellow, and Whittier, Watkins Harper wrote poems that are hymnal in nature and intent. As public poetry designed for oral performance and to move the entire congregation, the hymn is grounded in a literary philosophy of simplicity

---

<sup>18</sup> Tracts were one of many publication venues that temperance women utilized. Carol Mattingly notes, “In addition to writing for the WCTU’s [Women’s Christian Temperance Union’s] publication house, women published with the various tract societies, with Sunday school publication houses, and with the National Temperance Publication Association” (64). Harper often published her temperance poems, essays, speeches, and fiction in African-American periodicals and journals. See Foster’s introduction to *Minnie’s Sacrifice; Sowing and Reaping; Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels* (xv).

<sup>19</sup> For more on the uses of hymns during the nineteenth century, see Hobbs (34-69), Douglas (217-220), and Gray (139-140, 172).

and clarity” (129). Indeed, Harper can be read as one in a long line of Unitarian hymnodists who wrote exceptional verses in form and content (Douglas 218).

Harper’s Unitarian framework is also displayed through her choices of biblical characters and allusions in her poetry. She would have likely found the following passage from the doctrinal guide *Unitarian Principles Confirmed by Trinitarian Testimonies* (1880) instructive:

...the Bible is not, throughout its various portions, a book only of dark and intricate passages leading to no certain conclusion. It abounds in narratives, whose beautiful simplicity and tender pathos are grateful to the ear of childhood; in pictures of divine heroism and disinterestedness which arrest the eye of youth; in songs of purity and piety which lift to higher realms the common mind of manhood; in words of comfort and consolation which impart heavenly strength and holy trust to the heart and feebleness of age. (228-229)

Harper’s poetry also contains “beautiful simplicity and tender pathos” for her readers.

She wanted to edify her readers by showing “pictures of divine heroism” from the Bible, as she does with her character of Moses.

### **Choosing to Lead: Moses and Harper**

In one of Harper’s 1856 poems, “The Burial of Moses,” the speaker eulogizes Moses as follows:

This was the bravest warrior  
That ever buckled sword;  
This the most gifted Poet  
That ever breath’d a word;

And never earth’s philosopher  
Traced with his golden pen  
On the deathless page truths half so sage  
As he wrote down for men.

Through this description, Moses turns out to be a “bard,” not simply a prophet and liberator (*Brighter* 78). Expanding upon the Deuteronomic account of Moses’ death, the verse “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses”<sup>20</sup> becomes, in Harper’s hands, “This the most gifted Poet / That ever breath’d a word.” For Harper, Moses’ transcription of God’s law in the Ten Commandments and the Torah is a poetic act, writing on a “deathless page” for the Hebrew people. More than a philosopher espousing “sage” truths, the speaker reminds the reader of Moses’ role as a scribe and interpreter, an intermediary speaking to the people on God’s behalf, a leader skilled in poetic transliteration.

Considering Harper’s own conception of her poetic project as delineated in her 1853 essay “Christianity,” her portrayal of Moses as a poet in “The Burial of Moses” is hardly surprising.<sup>21</sup> The first line of “Christianity” reads as follows: “Christianity is a system claiming God for its author, and the welfare of man for its object” (*Brighter* 96). From the outset, Harper defines Christianity in authorial terms; the framework of the Christian “system” is explicitly literary, with a specific purpose—“the welfare of man.” Yet if God is the author of the (here feminized) system of Christianity, poetry is her handmaiden: “Poetry has culled [Christianity’s] fairest flowers and wreathed her softest, to bind her Author’s ‘bleeding brow’” (*Brighter* 97). For Harper, poetry is a conductive medium that allows her to impart simple biblical truths and reflect on complex theological mysteries such as the reconciliation of humanity with God “through the death

---

<sup>20</sup> Deuteronomy 34.10.

<sup>21</sup> “According to Daniel Payne, ‘Christianity’ was first published in 1853 in the *Christian Recorder*. This essay helped establish Frances Harper’s national reputation. It was reprinted in both the *Provincial Freeman* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, and in 1855, William C. Nell quoted several parts in his *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. Harper included this essay in the 1854 editions of *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Boston and Philadelphia) and in all subsequent editions of that work” (Foster, *Brighter* 95).

of His Son” (*Brighter* 98-99). Like Moses, Harper becomes a poetic liaison between God and the people, performing a kind of coauthorship by encouraging others to take the moral path outlined in “the Word of God,” which Harper believed to be “unique and pre-eminent” (*Brighter* 98).

A Unitarian writer and orator, Harper could “envision herself as a poet-preacher whose faith in the particular figure of Christ empowered her to promote social engagement in order to achieve the goal of universal harmony” (Peterson 124). At base, Harper employed a “pragmatic poetics” steeped in “Christian humanism” (*Written* 135, Stetson 5); she wrote to make “Songs for the People,” as the title of one of her poems affirms, addressing issues such as temperance, rights for women, education, suffrage, Christian commitment, and the abolition of slavery. Throughout her life, “her commitment to a literature of purpose and of wide appeal remained constant” (*Brighter* 25).

Despite her popularity and wide publication during the nineteenth century, some literary critics have dealt harshly with Harper, finding her less than “deserving of preservation” (Wagner 23), a poet “to be remembered rather for what she attempted than for what she accomplished” (Redding 43). However, more recent studies theorizing sentimentality have begun to dismantle previous notions about women’s writing during the nineteenth century, particularly in terms of Harper’s project.<sup>22</sup> Harper’s regular deployment of ballad and hymn meter, using conventional verse forms and rhyme schemes that lend themselves easily to memorization and oral delivery, allowed her readers to encounter “emotionally charged language and imagery” meant to appeal to black and white audiences alike (Hill 61). Through her verse, Harper used textualized

---

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent review of scholarship on sentimentality, see June Howard’s “What is Sentimentality?”

sympathy to facilitate a special “connection between reader and character; the former is asked to feel *with* the latter, partially to submerge his or her identity and experience in the emotions of the fictional figure in order to transform partial sameness into identity” (emphasis in original, Hendler 5). Such a connection created a “strange symbiosis of racial and religious feeling” (Wagner 27) which would challenge the reader to “channel feelings toward benevolent and moral ends” (Peterson 125). Harper utilized familiar themes and characters such as the biblical Moses to make the most of a shared body of knowledge; “by recasting and retelling biblical stories and infusing them with the spirit of black life, Harper found a language that was accessible to blacks, who may have been illiterate but who knew these tales well” (Stetson 7). Whites of the period would have also been familiar with the biblical characters and theological principles that Harper used. In fact, “Harper was careful to choose figures who were familiar to and instructive for the greatest number of readers” (*Written* 141). Like other popular writers of the period, Harper’s poetry can be read as “an instance of speech whose expressive and mimetic power is organized explicitly or implicitly for argumentative ends—in order to achieve a practical goal: persuasion” (Bennett 5).

Indeed, a great deal of Harper’s poetry seems to involve convincing her readers, both black and white, to act in moral ways. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, Harper considered slavery to be a serious moral issue that continued to occupy her attention even after emancipation. Both in antebellum poems featuring an enslaved first-person speaker (such as her often-reprinted poem “Eliza Harris”) and in postbellum poetry like *Moses*, Harper seems to make use of the same kind of immediacy provided by

first-person slave narratives to call her readers to piety and avoidance of sin.<sup>23</sup> Harper's poems suggest that Harper believed sin to be a very real danger, with real consequences. And one of the pits of sin that an unwary nation like the United States might fall into was that of slavery.

Harper's 1854 poem "Bible Defence of Slavery [sic]" presents the "holy horror" that abounds when the word of God is used to reinforce the system of slavery (*Brighter* 60). Through this deceitful, erroneous practice, a "mockery of praise" insults "God's majestic throne," and a so-called "'reverend' man" sacrifices truth on the altar of slavery. The final stanza reads as follows:

Oh! when ye pray for heathen lands,  
And plead for their dark shores,  
Remember Slavery's cruel hands  
Make heathens at your doors!

The speaker of Harper's poem is pointing out the irony of sending prayers and missionaries to foreign lands to save the "heathens," neglecting the fact that the system of slavery gives rise to "heathens" in the United States. She seems to imply that these local "heathens" might be both slaves who are kept from hearing the true word of God and whites whose souls are endangered through such a corrupt doctrine and cruel practice. Similarly, through the "pseudonymous narrator" Linda Brent (Yellin 87), Harriet Jacobs asserts in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:

There are thousands, who...are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home.... Tell [American slaveholders] they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it. (emphasis in original, 73)

---

<sup>23</sup> Foster points out that Harper is most remembered for poems providing "authentic renditions of the slaves' points of view," akin to slave narratives and spirituals (*Brighter* 54).



Jacobs's language is vivid; thousands of slaves are dying of spiritual thirst because slaveholders have kept them from accessing God's "Fountain of Life" (and thus risking their own eternal lives). For both Jacobs and Harper, slavery is the sin that threatens to separate America from God, and it poisons social relationships.<sup>24</sup>

Even after slavery ended, America was still reaping its bitter fruits. As Harper's 1900 poem "An Appeal to My Countrywomen" illustrates, slavery leaves white Americans "sin-laden and guilty," in a position where "The sharp sickles of God's retribution / Will gather [their] harvest of crime," reaping God's judgment: "Sorrow follows the footsteps of crime, / And Sin is the consort of Woe" (*Brighter* 386). Through slavery, sorrow follows upon sorrow, leaving a horrible legacy. Harper is determined to wrestle with this legacy in poetic terms, and she chooses to retell the biblical story of the Exodus in order to do so. Moses is her chosen redeemer, and he chooses his downtrodden people.

The poem "The Jewish Grandfather's Story" provides an instructive example of Harper's impulse to define leadership in biblical terms. The speaker (the grandfather) includes a list of biblical leaders, both male and female, including Joshua, Saul, Jephthah, Gideon, Deborah, and David. However, rather than beginning the list with the first patriarch, Abraham, the grandfather begins what he calls "the story of our race" with "our grand old leader, Moses" (*Brighter* 245). Through the logic of this poem, Harper presents Moses as the archetype for leadership, and the spiritual ancestor of leaders to come.

---

<sup>24</sup> Before either Harper or Jacobs, Frederick Douglass memorably railed against the hypocritical Christianity espoused by American slaveholders in the appendix to his 1845 autobiography:

They attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.... They are they who are represented as professing to love God whom they have not seen, whilst they hate their brother whom they have seen. They love the heathen on the other side of the globe. They can pray for him, pay money to have the Bible put into his hand, and missionaries to instruct him; while they despise and totally neglect the heathen at their own doors. (110)

In the essay “Our Greatest Want,” published in *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859, Harper claims that leadership is necessary to free the “millions of our race in the prison house of slavery” (*Brighter* 103). In order to achieve freedom, “true men and true women” must rise up as Moses did (*Brighter* 103). Harper outlines Moses as a crucial character in her personal iconography:

I like the character of Moses. He is the first disunionist we read of in the Jewish Scriptures. The magnificence of Pharaoh’s throne loomed up before his vision, its oriental splendors glittered before his eyes; but he turned from them all and chose rather to suffer with the enslaved, than rejoice with the free. He would have no union with the slave power of Egypt. (*Brighter* 103-4)

Notice that Harper uses Moses as a call for (implicitly middle-class) blacks to be “ready and willing to lay time, talent and money on the altar of universal freedom” (*Brighter* 104). An ideal leader should make the *choice* to “suffer with the enslaved”; it seems that true leadership qualities will not be found in one who is already enslaved himself. As in her epic narrative poem, *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, Harper here “valorizes the voluntarism of Moses’ gesture.... As Harper tells it, Moses’ heroism lies in his willing decision to ‘be’ what he is not, throwing in his lot with an oppressed people with whom he has, in terms of situation and expectations, nothing in common” (Bennett 88).

Paradoxically, then, an effective leader must be a member of an oppressed people while simultaneously exhibiting extraordinary characteristics and/or status atypical of the race.

In many ways, Harper’s description of Moses’ choice to align himself with his race could be read as a validation for her own life choices. As an educated, middle-class black woman, Harper could have allowed herself to ignore the suffering of the majority of her race in favor of an easier life. Instead, she decided to unite her destiny with her fellow African-Americans, working vigorously on their behalf during the Civil War and

during Reconstruction. As she clearly stated in a March, 1870 letter to William Still, “a prominent abolitionist and [her] long-time friend” (*Brighter* 5), “I belong to this race, and when it is down I belong to a down race; when it is up I belong to a risen race” (*Brighter* 128). Just as the characters Iola Leroy and Doctor Latimer in Harper’s 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, were duty-bound to their race “by blood and choice” (Harper 238), going so far as to move to the South at the end of the novel in order to help “sink the old animosities of slavery into the new community of interests arising from freedom” (Harper 279), so Harper deliberately aligned herself with her race, going on a lecture tour in the South during the early part of Reconstruction, preaching a message of “reconciliation among fellow citizens” (*Brighter* 19).<sup>25</sup> Through her life and literary work, Harper continuously proclaimed the need to choose activism over ease.

Yet it would be too simplistic to absolutely equate Harper’s situation with her portrayal of Moses. In the first place, Harper’s status as a single, black woman living and working in dangerous, racially-integrated situations (*Brighter* 13) was worlds and millennia away from Moses’ status as Pharaoh’s-adopted-son-turned-Hebrew in the biblical account. More importantly, instead of likening herself to him, Harper linked other historical personages to Moses. As Melba Joyce Boyd points out in her groundbreaking book, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*, Harper esteemed Harriet Tubman as a female Moses (85) and Abraham Lincoln as a man who “has led us through another Red Sea to the land of triumphant victory” (qtd. in Boyd: 87). For Harper, Moses was a figure who could be invoked to denote a special kind of leadership, empowering a people and leading them to

---

<sup>25</sup> For an interesting reading of *Iola Leroy* that explains the ideology of racial uplift in the context of “the cultural impress of the conservative, social Darwinist thought of the times,” see Gaines (36-37).

freedom.

Before Moses could lead his people to freedom, however, he had to learn how to become a leader. As we shall see in *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, for Harper, women often play crucial roles in the empowerment of future leaders like Moses, enabling a specific kind of poetic leadership. Harper seems to have “accepted the popular notion that women are civilizing influences on men and that the womanly virtues of piety, domesticity, and sacrifice strengthened manners and morals and assured the sanctity of the home” (Stetson 6); in *Moses*, women such as Miriam, Zipporah, and Moses’ Hebrew mother perform such civilizing functions for Moses, calling him to a kind of leadership that involves the development of character over a long period of time. *Moses* therefore fulfills an important ethic of womanhood from the nineteenth century: “Character building, a lifelong process, was supposed to begin in the (ideal middle-class) home under the direction of a devoted mother” (Coultrap-McQuin 8). By highlighting women in the production of a “prophet, leader, warrior, and...model of revolutionary consciousness” (Graham xliii), Harper delineated the chain of influence that would allow a black leader to perform “a pronounced negation of selfhood” in order to liberate his people (Graham xli).

### **Archetypes of Leadership in *Moses: A Story of the Nile***

Harper’s *Moses: A Story of the Nile* is an epic narrative poem in blank verse that is divided into nine chapters. Chapter I, “The Parting,” begins with a dramatic dialogue between Moses and his adoptive mother, Charmian (“Princess”). From the outset, Moses declares,

I go to join  
The fortunes of my race, and to put aside  
All other bright advantages, save  
The approval of my conscience and the meed  
Of rightly doing. (*Brighter* 139)

Already Harper has emphasized Moses' *choice* of what Charmian calls "the badge of servitude and toil" (*Brighter* 139). As if to highlight the deliberate choice of such hardship, Harper adds an extra beat to a regularly five-stress line as Moses assures the Princess: "'tis no / Sudden freak nor impulse wild that moves my mind" (*Brighter* 139). In addition, this line includes an inverse of stress up until the final beat, combining trochee after trochee. Moses here chooses his metric stresses, in addition to his life fortunes, as if to prepare himself for "the hour...when God--the God / Our fathers loved and worshipped--shall break our chains, / And lead our willing feet to freedom" (*Brighter* 139). The "willing feet" this line describes are both metric and literal; when God is invoked, blank verse again breaks down, rupturing the line in a symbolic chain-breaking through the appearance of the dash.

Upon hearing Moses' declaration that God himself would break the chains of Hebrew slavery, Charmian responds with the fear that Moses' "manhood" will be threatened by his decision to leave the throne that awaits him, choosing "the shadow of those / Bondage-darkened huts" (*Brighter* 139). In terms of the logic of the poem, however, through Harper's ethic of uplift, Moses' manhood has been tested and proven by his decision to cast his lot with his (biological) mother's people.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> For an interesting discussion of the Exodus story in terms of the politics of respectability, moral reform, and "gender roles [informing] this middle-class ideology of racial uplift," see Glaude (118-125). In Harper's work, the theme of manhood being tested is also present in "The Ragged Stocking," one of the temperance poems she added to the 1889 edition of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. In this poem, the male first-person speaker is corrupted by "Strong drink" just "When [he] stood on manhood's brink," leading to sin and suffering (*Brighter* 258). Yet the speaker ultimately (and very emotionally) makes the choice to put his family first and put down "the bowl," effectively restoring his manhood and saving his soul (*Brighter* 259).

In his history of the Businessmen's Revival in Boston in 1858, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century*, John Corrigan quotes a magazine of the period, *The Young Man's Friend*, in order to show that, for nineteenth-century Americans, manhood was ideally displayed through virtue: "Rejecting wealth, birth and blood... the magazine concluded that a person showed himself a man... 'by manly interest in the elevation of the race' (including all persons regardless of color), and 'by a manly submission to the government of God' " (147). Rather than putting his manhood in jeopardy, then, Moses' decision to forgo former comforts and align himself with his race, submitting to God's will, displays the combination of "emotion and judgment" within himself as a subject (Corrigan 3). As Corrigan notes, during the nineteenth century, "emotionality was a claim for and a demonstration of the legitimacy of the subjective self, of the capacity of the self to *freely choose*" (my emphasis, 3).

Throughout the dialogue between Moses and Charmian in Chapter I of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, Moses uses emotionally-charged language and imagery to emphasize his clear reasoning and free choice; how could he continue to live with the knowledge that "bitter tears moisten the bread [his] brethren eat" (*Brighter* 140)? According to Corrigan, the workings of sentiment and subjectivity were distinctively aligned in the nineteenth century through a "Protestant mythology of the autonomous human feeling and thinking subject... [resting] on an assumption about the complementarity of body and soul, of an inner subjective world and a mechanical, objective outer realm somehow conjoined" (3-4). Moses is unwilling to allow his own body to remain free while the bodies of his brethren suffer in bondage. His emotionality on this topic only lends credence to his decision to leave the Pharaoh's palace behind. In this way, as for both

men and women in the nineteenth century, “the control of emotion was an undertaking founded on the assumption that feeling was a discrete part of human life that could be channeled, manipulated, repressed, or expressed” (Corrigan 138). Moses’ emotionality presented a model for Harper’s readers, a demonstration of the importance of sympathy in directing life choices.

Charmian also presents a pathos meant to evoke sympathy through her description of the past. Her report of finding Moses as a child in the Nile foreshadows his role as liberator and poetic law-giver, since she describes his floating basket as a “little ark” (*Brighter* 140). Not only does this description recall the plight of Noah and the flood (a righteous remnant spared by God from destruction as God eventually spared the Hebrew slaves), but it also invokes the ark of the covenant, in which the stone tablets of the law (containing the Ten Commandments) were later placed, along with other sacred objects.<sup>27</sup> Charmian speaks rightly when she calls the basket a “little ark,” for the child within grows up to be instrumental in the establishment of the covenant between God and the people.

Frances Smith Foster asserts that, in Chapter I of *Moses*, the reader is meant to sympathize with both Charmian’s heroism as well as that of Moses (*Written* 137). Through Charmian’s conflict with her father, the Pharaoh, who wants to kill baby Moses for belonging to a “mean and servile race” (*Brighter* 141), Harper fills in an important part of the backstory from the biblical account. In the poem, Pharaoh himself speaks the words of his fatal decree, saying that “every man child of that / Hated race shall die” (*Brighter* 142). Missing from the poem, however, is the role of the Hebrew midwives to

---

<sup>27</sup> See Exodus 25.16.

which the king of Egypt first gave this bloody order. In the first chapter of Exodus, the ingenious leadership of Shiphrah and Puah (two of these midwives) involved not obeying the Pharaoh's edict. When questioned as to why the baby boys were not being put to death, these women explained to Pharaoh that Hebrew women were too "vigorous," giving birth so easily that a midwife would not even have time to get there (Exodus 1.17-19).

In Harper's poetic recounting of the story, the role of midwifery seems to be shifted onto the Princess (Charmian), Moses' Hebrew mother, and his sister (Miriam). Moses survives because of the intervention of the Princess and the watchful eye of Miriam, who makes sure that Moses' own biological mother will be his nurse at the palace. Although these events are also in the biblical story, Harper seems to place special emphasis on the roles of these three women by giving them "larger, more active parts in the liberation story" (*Written* 136). In a sense, Charmian, Moses' Hebrew mother, and Miriam become "emotional midwives who [elicit] male expression of feeling by utilizing their special gifts of patience, affection, and spousal, sisterly, or daughterly devotion" (Corrigan 157). Their interactions with Moses eventually direct him to his most important life choice, as well as his expression of that choice in emotional language.

At the end of Charmian's long speech in the first chapter of *Moses*, an omniscient third-person narrator appears. In this instance, the narrative voice serves almost the same function as a musical rest; the narrator literally marks the silence, calling attention to the "...hurried breathing of one and the quick / Throbbing of the other's heart" (*Brighter* 143). The repeated "h" sounds of these lines ("Heard," "hurried," "heart" ), as well as their erratic metrical pattern, allows the reader to hear the irregular breathing and



heartbeats of the two participants in the dialogue.

Following these sonorous lines is the only reference to Moses' weakness as explained in the biblical account. The narrator claims that Moses "was slow of speech, but she [Charmian] was eloquent" (*Brighter* 143). In addition to increasing the amount of time devoted to women, then, Harper alters the biblical account of the Moses story by downplaying Moses' potential faults. Whereas Moses makes excuse after excuse in his encounter with God at the burning bush, claiming, "'O my Lord, I have never been eloquent... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue'" (Exodus 4.10), Harper depicts Moses' slowness of speech as an enhancement to the power of the story. He may be "slow of speech," especially in contrast to Charmian's eloquence, but there is "Firmness in the young man's choice" that translates into a steadiness of voice and purpose through the "calm / Grandeur of his will" (*Brighter* 143). Perhaps due to the fact that, at least in the nineteenth century, "male speech [was] a marker for the masculine character" (Corrigan 153), the narrator of *Moses* never again mentions Moses' speech impediment. Rather, as Moses' character develops over the course of the poem, he becomes even more strong and calm. At the beginning of Chapter IV, for example, the narrator notes: "the fire / That glowed within his youthful eye had deepened / To a calm and steady light" (*Brighter* 151).

As the first chapter of *Moses: A Story of the Nile* draws to a close, Moses explains to Charmian the importance of his Hebrew mother's role as storyteller, guide to the "distant past" of his race (*Brighter* 143). He remembers Abraham's faith being tested on "Moriah's mount" (*Brighter* 143), as well as the promise outlined in God's covenant with Abraham. However, rather than directly referencing the words of the biblical covenant in

terms of land and descendants, Harper implicitly invokes a dream of “deep and terrifying darkness” that descended upon Abraham after having been given the initial covenant promise (Genesis 15.12-16). By reminding the reader of this foretelling of enslavement and immediately juxtaposing that vision with the smooth “s” sounds of “Deliverance,” “peace,” “vines,” “palms,” “flocks,” “herds,” and “Increase” (*Brighter* 144), Harper encompasses a trajectory from Abraham to Moses, a deliverance that will be made possible through Moses’ leadership skills. As the poem states, his “mission” is to “share the fortune of his race” and “lead his captive race to freedom,” king-like, “anointed” for his purpose (*Brighter* 145). In fact, the very last words of Chapter I of *Moses* prefigure the transfiguration, a New Testament event where Jesus met with Moses and Elijah atop an unnamed mountain, standing “bright...through the changing centuries of time” (*Brighter* 145).<sup>28</sup> Moses is a leader for all time, across the Old and New Testaments.

Chapter II of *Moses* presents a shift in the strategy of the poem as the narrative voice takes over instead of a primary back-and-forth dialogue between characters. In a kind of second birth, “The quickening of a higher life, as if his / Soul had wings and he were conscious of their growth,” Moses goes to the “lowly homes of Goshen” where his race had lived since the time of Joseph (*Brighter* 146). Having returned to his people, Moses is appalled to see their “heavy burdens,” and is glad to tell his mother, “ ‘I’ve come to share the fortunes of my race’ ” (*Brighter* 146). His mother is not surprised that he has returned; never believing that he could forsake his people, she “had stronger faith than that” (*Brighter* 147). That same faith allowed her to risk death by devising a plan to save Moses in the first place, and helped her to nurse him for Princess Charmian. A different kind of enabler, Moses’ mother is nevertheless similar to Charmian in terms of

---

<sup>28</sup> For the transfiguration, see Mark 9.2-8, Matthew 17.1-8, and Luke 9.28-36.

her devotion to Moses and her desire to protect him.

Notably, Chapter II of *Moses* presents a significant change from the biblical story. Instead of simply enhancing the role of a character (such as Moses' mother), Harper here presents an event that clarifies for the reader just what was at stake in Moses' decision to leave the Pharaoh's house. Devising a temple scene in which Moses was supposed to ceremonially "bind [his] soul to Egypt, and to swear / Allegiance to her gods" (*Brighter* 147), Harper employs a version of the first of the Ten Commandments in the language that Moses was to use to betray the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

The priests of On  
Drew near to lay their hands upon my head  
And bid me swear, 'Now, by Osiris, judge  
Of all the dead, and Isis, mother of us  
All,' that henceforth I'd forswear my kindred,  
Tribe and race; would have no other gods  
Than those of Egypt; would be engrafted  
Into Pharaoh's royal line, and be called  
The son of Pharaoh's daughter. (*Brighter* 147-8)

At this crucial moment, Moses recalls his past, remembering the inspirational stories of his mother. Before the Ten Commandments are even given to him, Moses seems to know that he should have "no other gods" before him.<sup>29</sup> Moses refuses to " 'pass' for an Egyptian and deny his race" (Boyd 94), just as he refuses to deny his God. In the logic of the poem, through this deviation from the biblical plot, Harper suggests that "Moses' Hebrew mother played a critical role in his subversive religious and political acculturation" (Boyd 94). It is Moses' mother who "sustains his cultural identity while he resides under the influence of Pharaoh's earthly power" (Boyd 97). Because she nurtured him, planting the "seed" of the story of Abraham (*Brighter* 148), Moses has no need for the engrafting process as presented in the temple ceremony; his spiritual legacy comes

---

<sup>29</sup> Exodus 20.3.

from elsewhere.

The most significant departure from the biblical account in Chapter III of *Moses*, “Flight into Midian,” involves a subtle shift in the story of how Moses killed an Egyptian overseer who was beating an elderly Hebrew slave. In the Exodus version, Moses is aware that the Hebrews are his “kinsfolk” (Exodus 2.11), but he has not yet aligned himself with the Hebrew race. Instead, he is still an adopted son of the Pharaoh, and his actions put his life in jeopardy. The *Moses* poem, however, presents Moses as “Only a Hebrew youth” when he kills the Egyptian (*Brighter* 150). In this way, Harper presents Moses as having less power (as a Hebrew slave) than he did in the biblical account (as Pharaoh’s son). Whereas the temple ceremony functions for Harper as the turning point that causes Moses to return to his people, the biblical account gives a less noble view: Moses fled because he feared for his life, and therefore went to his people in Midian. For Harper, Moses needs to cast his lot with his people by *choice* rather than coerced necessity.

Chapter IV presents yet another example of Harper downplaying Moses’ reluctance to lead. In the narrator’s rendering of the burning bush scene, Moses’ only hesitation seems directly connected to a desire to shrink from the “dreadful majesty / Of God” (*Brighter* 152). “By Horeb’s mount, his shrinking hands received / The burden of his God, which bade him go / To Egypt’s guilty king, and bid him let / The oppressed go free” (*Brighter* 152). And Aaron’s role as Moses’ mouthpiece (given to him by God, in anger, because he put forth so many excuses)<sup>30</sup> also becomes a role of companionship (“to bear him company,” *Brighter* 153), emphasizing the importance of communal discussion of “the great deliverance about to dawn / Upon the fortunes of their race”

---

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 4.14.

between Moses, Aaron, and other “elders” (*Brighter* 153). In effect, at this moment Harper begins to more specifically encourage “an allegorical connection between the repression and enslavement of the Hebrew people and the Afroamerican dilemma. This parallel provides a context for historical insight, spiritual fortification, and revolutionary action” (Boyd 80). Harper uses Moses as a figurehead who can speak to Pharaoh, representing the voice of the people, a voice that could appreciate the following sentiment: “we bide our time, / And hide our wrath in every nerve, and only / Wait a fitting hour to strike the hands that press / Us down” (*Brighter* 150). Moses is a good model for leadership because he does not think of himself, but rather of those he represents in “mission” and “message” (*Brighter* 154).

Although it takes ten terrible plagues for Pharaoh to realize the error of his ways, along with intricate metrical patterns that enact the very clogging of Egypt’s pathways with “loathsome vermin” (*Brighter* 157), Pharaoh eventually lets the Hebrew slaves go in Chapter V of *Moses*. More importantly, the path that Moses and Aaron must tread to convince Pharaoh to let their people free is set up in this chapter of the poem as pre-apostolic, a kind of Christ-like action. Unreservedly, Harper allows Moses to be a forerunner of Jesus: both free their people through the symbolic action of blood (Moses through the plague of the death of the firstborn, Christ through death on the cross). In a kind of African-American liberationist theology, “Moses and Jesus Christ are viewed in a similar light, as forces of God and as symbols of physical and spiritual liberation” (Boyd 83). The imagery of Moses’ sacrifice in Chapter V is telling: his feet bleed, his “hands that bring / Salvation in their palms” are imagistically “pierced with cruel / Nails,” and his brow is “bent beneath the thorny crowns of earth” (*Brighter* 156). Through Moses,

there is “hope for Israel,” just as Jesus brings the hope of salvation to the world.

As the beginning of Chapter VI reminds us, however, Moses and his people are not yet out of harm’s way. Having just decided to free the slaves, Pharaoh changes his mind and decides to pursue his former subjects with deadly accuracy, illustrated through the metric perfection of his vow: “ ‘I’ll bring them back, or mete them out their graves’ ” (*Brighter* 158). Harper here stays close to the biblical story as the people complain, “ ‘Were there no graves in Egypt, that thou hast / Brought us here to die?’ ”<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, despite this despairing and ungrateful attitude, the Hebrew people are spared through the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, and Pharaoh and his armies die.

Frances Smith Foster has rightly emphasized that the person who gets to memorialize Israel’s triumph in song is Miriam (*Written* 137). At the end of Chapter VI, “Miriam’s Song” appears, in regularized 4/3 hymn meter that is set apart from the rest of the text (which is in blank verse). In Exodus 15, the song of triumph is sung by Moses and the Israelites, while Miriam leads the women in a miniature version of the song, accompanying words and music with the tambourine and dancing (Exodus 15.20-21). However, in Harper’s *Moses*, Miriam is linked strongly with her brother Moses (“ ’twas the voice of Moses’ sister,” *Brighter* 160) rather than Aaron (“the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister,” Exodus 15.20). This association with Moses strengthens Miriam’s supporting role in leadership while simultaneously making her a textual liason: “a woman now becomes...poet and historian” (*Written* 138). If we draw on Corrigan’s assessment of the increasing fluidity, or “manifest mutability” (128), of gender roles during the mid-nineteenth century, Harper seems to advocate women having a voice in the public sphere, at this moment; she recognizes Miriam’s capabilities as a social leader

---

<sup>31</sup> Exodus 14.11-12.

through her increased visibility in “Miriam’s Song.”

Part of the text of an 1883 article in the *Literary World* reads as follows: “the woman of letters must have some masculinity in her composition; her finer metal must be streaked with iron-ore; she must carry the sledge-hammer in her hand as well as wear the flower at her throat. She must be a *Miriam*, a *Deborah*, *prophetess as well as poet*; a woman who fathoms philosophies as well as fashions” (my emphasis, qtd. in Coultrap-McQuin: 18). As an orator, activist, and poet, Harper was essentially “streaked with iron-ore.” Writing Miriam as a prophet/poet in *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, Harper seems to have called for a specific kind of female leadership alongside extraordinary male leadership. Miriam’s devotion to her brother mirrors her devotion to her race and seems to have inspired his devotion. Moses goes on to “bear the evil manners of his race” when they retain the mentality of slavery (*Brighter* 162), acting as poetic intercessor between God and the people. Yet Miriam, through her celebratory poem, seems to be a different, although equally important, kind of intermediary. She may not have spoken directly with God on Mount Sinai as Moses did, but she is mentioned in Harper’s poem when Moses stands alone on another mountain: Nebo. According to the poem, “Aaron had died...and Miriam too was gone” (*Brighter* 164). Mentioned alongside these male leaders, Miriam seems vitally important to the poetics of leadership.

However, in typical Harper fashion, the death of Moses on Nebo as presented in Chapter IX of *Moses: A Story of the Nile* obscures problems in leadership. In the first place, the reason that Moses cannot enter the promised land of Canaan and must die on “Nebo’s mount” is not explicitly mentioned; the poem only states that “God’s decree was otherwise” (*Brighter* 164). In fact, according to Numbers 20.12, the reason that Moses

could not enter the promised land is that he “did not trust” God. Instead of obeying God’s command, he attempted to perform a miracle in his own way. Rather than emphasizing this disobedience, Harper’s narrator reflects on “The calm and solemn beauty on his aged brow, / The look of loving trust and lofty faith / Still beaming from an eye that neither care / Nor time had dimmed” (*Brighter* 164). Moses’ funeral on Nebo seems to fit his life’s destiny, therefore, as only angels attend him in death and “fairest flowers / Sprang up beneath their tread” (*Brighter* 165). By obscuring difficult details of Moses’ leadership style, Harper is able to celebrate his triumph in death, much as Miriam celebrated Israel’s victory over the Egyptians.

The poetic celebrations of Miriam and Moses do not contain the overt moralizing that some of Harper’s other poetry does. And although Joan Sherman justly claims that, in the case of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, “Harper maintains the pace of her long narrative and its tone of reverent admiration with scarcely a pause for moralizing” (73), there is one moment in *Moses* that retains a moralizing quality while again placing Moses’ life in a Christological framework. In Chapter VII of *Moses*, when Moses receives his poetic legacy through the Ten Commandments (“the solemn / Decalogue,” *Brighter* 161), Harper’s narrator theologically connects the first commandment, “Only one God—” (*Brighter* 161), with a Pauline doctrine of Christians being God’s children and heirs, and therefore “joint-heirs with Christ,” God’s son (Romans 8.17).<sup>32</sup>

Only one God,—  
This truth received into the world’s great life,

---

<sup>32</sup> See Deuteronomy 6.4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD” (*Holy Bible: King James Version*). Also see Exodus 20.2-3 (“I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” *Holy Bible: King James Version*). For nineteenth-century commentary on more Bible verses supporting the doctrine of God’s unity, see Wilson’s 1880 *Unitarian Principles* (388-391). For commentary on Jesus as a fellow child of God, “not as God the Son, but as the Son of God,” see Wilson (460).



Not as an idle dream nor speculative thing,  
But as a living, vitalizing thought,  
Should bind us closer to our God and link us  
With our fellow man, the b[r]others and co-heirs  
With Christ, the elder brother of our race. (*Brighter* 161)

This is clearly a Unitarian move, combining one of the central Old Testament verses Unitarians used to confirm God's as "one" (not the triune Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) with a New Testament verse emphasizing Jesus as a fellow child of God. As Floyd-Thomas explains, "the doctrines of Unitarianism emphasize the oneness of God (Trinitarianism is rejected as unscriptural since the doctrine of the Trinity was not explicitly addressed in the Bible); the strict humanity of Jesus, although all persons, as children of God, are divine; [and] the perfectibility of human character" (58). Through "the unity of God" and her representation of Christ as an "elder brother" (*Brighter* 161), Harper connects the God of Moses to Jesus Christ, and therefore to the need for social justice. Audiences who heard Harper recite *Moses: A Story of the Nile* could not have failed to grasp the importance of the following words:<sup>33</sup>

Only one God! the strongest hands  
Should help the weak who bend before the blasts  
Of life, because if God is only one  
Then we are children of his mighty hand,  
And when we best serve man, we also serve  
Our God. Let haughty rulers learn that men  
Of humblest birth and lowliest lot have  
Rights as sacred and divine as theirs. (*Brighter* 162)

As the 1869 second edition of *Moses* is the first one extant, we do not know just how early Harper composed these lines. However, it is likely that she wrote *Moses* around the time of her lecture tour in the South (*Brighter* 138). In the above portion of *Moses*, it is

---

<sup>33</sup> As Boyd states, the "correlation between poetic text and contemporary history was undoubtedly made more directly when Harper recited the poem within the context of lectures given before black audiences during the Reconstruction era" (98).

clear that Harper's theology deeply affected her logic and her poetics. "Haughty rulers" must keep in mind that slaves, or after emancipation, recently-freed persons of lowly lot, also have rights. More importantly, as one of the five poems on biblical subjects added to Harper's 1893 reissue of *Moses* outlines, memory is crucial to the project of uplift following Reconstruction. Along with the speaker of "Deliverance," the reader is invited to ask:

Should we forget the wondrous change  
That to our people came,  
When justice rose and sternly plead  
Our cause with sword and flame?

The answer, as both "Deliverance" and *Moses* assert, is that we should not forget. Rather, inspired by leaders of the past, new leaders must "Rise up with one accord, / And in the name of Christ go forth / To battle for the Lord" (*Brighter* 336).

### **"For Christ's and Simon's Sake": Enacting that "Brighter Coming Day"**

I would like to offer a final meditation on another poem added to Harper's *Moses* collection in 1893 that anchors her Unitarian theology of social justice. In "Simon's Countrymen," Harper retells the biblical story of Simon of Cyrene, a man who bore Jesus' cross on the way to Golgotha (the location where Jesus would be executed) when Jesus could no longer physically support the weight of the cross (Matt. 27.32). The poem explains that Simon was from Egypt (the country where the young child Jesus and his parents escaped to "When Herod vainly bared his sword / And sought the child to slay,"

*Brighter* 333)—in short, a black man.<sup>34</sup> The poem also makes a point of showing that Simon stepped in to help Jesus when his disciples had deserted him. Yet despite Simon's important contribution, many white Christians "Forget that Simon's countrymen / Still bear a cross of shame" (*Brighter* 334). Like she did in her 1854 poem "Bible Defence of Slavery [sic]," in "Simon's Countrymen," Harper recognizes the irony of missionaries going to "distant heathen lands" to share the gospel when, in the United States, "Where Christian churches rise, / The dark-browed sons of Africa / Are hated and despised" (*Brighter* 334). Harper's speaker proclaims herself one of these American children of Africa by using the pronoun "we" to appeal to white Christians, asking them to give a helping hand to their "opprest" fellow Christians and to "...say for Christ's and Simon's sake, / We'll wipe away your tears" (334). In return, Harper's speaker offers forgiveness and a hand of friendship to Christians who were slaveholders or who allowed slavery to continue:

For years of sorrow, toil and pain  
We'll bring you love and light,  
And in the name of Christ our Lord  
We'll make your pathway bright.

The trajectory of this poem suggests that the "brighter coming day" Harper hoped for during her Southern lecture tour will come more quickly if Christians from all races and walks of life join together, "Till rich and poor and bond and free / In Christ shall all be one" (*Brighter* 124, 334). By referencing Galatians 3.28 ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus," *Holy Bible: King James Version*), Harper suggests that being "one" with Christ is simultaneously liberating and accountability-inducing. As in Chapter VII of

---

<sup>34</sup> See Matthew 2 for the birth of Jesus and the flight into Egypt. In this chapter, "Matthew explicitly compares Jesus to Moses" (Coogan 10 NT).

*Moses*, unity with God in Christ brings all Christians closer to one another and inspires selfless acts. Holding up Moses, Miriam, Jesus, and numerous “I”-voiced speakers as leadership models, Harper calls all of her readers to lead with the example of their own lives.

## Works Cited

- Bennett, Paula Bernat. *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003. Print.
- Bordin, Ruth. *Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981. Print.
- Boyd, Melba Joyce. *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994. Print.
- Coogan, Michael D., et al, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Corrigan, John. *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century*. Los Angeles: U of California P, 2002. Print.
- Coultrap-McQuin, Susan Margaret. *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1990. Print.
- Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Intro. Kwame Anthony Appiah. New York: Modern Library, 2000. 1-113. Print.
- Floyd-Thomas, Juan M. *The Origins of Black Humanism in America: Reverend Ethelred Brown and the Unitarian Church*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Foster, Frances Smith, ed. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. New York: Feminist, 1990. Print.
- . *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- , ed. Introduction. *Minnie's Sacrifice; Sowing and Reaping; Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper*. Boston: Beacon, 1994. xi-xxxvii. Print.
- Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996.
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. "Frances E. W. Harper." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton, 1997. 408-411. Print.

- Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. "The Politics of 'Silence': Dual-Sex Political Systems and Women's Traditions of Conflict in African-American Religion." *African-American Christianity: Essays in History*. Ed. Paul E. Johnson. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994. 80-110. Print.
- Glaude, Jr., Eddie S. *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. Print.
- Graham, Maryemma. Introduction. *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. xxxiii-lvii. Print.
- Gray, F. Elizabeth. *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Hardesty, Nancy A. *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*. 1984. 2nd ed. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1999. Print.
- Harper, Frances E. W. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. New York: Feminist, 1990. Print.
- . *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*. 1893, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- . *Sowing and Reaping: A Temperance Story. 1876-1877. Minnie's Sacrifice; Sowing and Reaping; Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. Boston: Beacon, 1994. 93-176. Print.
- Hendler, Glenn. Introduction. *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001. 1-26. Print.
- Hill, Patricia Liggins. "'Let Me Make the Songs for the People': A Study of Frances Watkins Harper's Poetry." *Black American Literature Forum* 15.2 (1981): 60-65. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 July 2010.
- Hobbs, June Hadden. *"I Sing for I Cannot Be Silent": The Feminization of American Hymnody, 1870-1920*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997. Print.
- The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1972. Print.
- Howard, June. "What is Sentimentality?" *American Literary History* 11.1 (1999): 63-81. Print.
- Jacobs, Harriet A., ed. L. Maria Child. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. 1861. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.

- Mattingly, Carol. *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Rhetoric*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1998. Print.
- Nord, David Paul. *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
- Peterson, Carla L. "*Doers of the Word*": *African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.
- Pinn, Anthony. *Why, Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*. New York: Continuum, 1995. Print.
- "Ravish." Def. 2. *An American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster; Thoroughly Revised and Greatly Enlarged and Improved, by Chauncey A. Goodrich and Noah Porter*. 1877. Print.
- Redding, J. Saunders. *To Make a Poet Black*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1939. Print.
- Sherman, Joan R. "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1824-1911." *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1989. 62-74. Print.
- Stetson, Erlene, ed. *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981. Print.
- Wagner, Jean. *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*. Trans. Kenneth Douglas. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1973. Print.
- Wilson, John. *Unitarian Principles Confirmed by Trinitarian Testimonies*. 10th ed. Boston, 1880. Web. *Google Book Search*. 20 May 2010.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989. Print.

## CHAPTER 5

### **“I Enjoyed Richly the Spirit of Adoption”: Experiential “Adoption” Theology in Zilpha Elaw’s *Memoirs***

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.*

—Romans 8.14-15a (NRSV)<sup>1</sup>

When Zilpha Elaw published her autobiography in London in 1846, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]*, she included a “Dedication” addressed to British Christians among whom she had lived and worked for the previous five years. From its opening salutation to closing blessing, this letter follows the biblical model of Pauline epistles in form and tone. Elaw’s dedication begins: “To the Saints and faithful Brethren in Christ, who have honoured my ministry [sic] with their attendance, in London and other localities of England. Grace be unto you, and peace, from God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ” (51). For comparison, consider Paul’s letter to the Romans, which includes the following greeting: “To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus

---

<sup>1</sup> This biblical quotation is taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 3rd ed. (edited by Coogan), as are other quotations in this chapter marked parenthetically (NRSV). Unless so noted, all other biblical citations in this chapter are taken from *The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*.



Christ” (Rom. 1.7).<sup>2</sup> Elaw’s letter also imitates Pauline epistles thematically: she personally reminisces about pleasant and invigorating spiritual encounters with her addressees (“it has been my happiness to enjoy much spiritual intercourse with many of you”), proclaims her unlikely status as a gospel messenger (referring to her own “poor and weak instrumentality” as a “coloured female”), and asks them to pray for her ministry, remembering her “pilgrim course and ministerial labours, at the throne of grace” (51). Most importantly, like Paul, Elaw challenges her readers to live holy lives modeled after Jesus Christ (“Imbibe the sentiments and spirit, the temper, disposition and manner of Christ Jesus, your inestimable pattern,” 52). Finally, Elaw ends her dedication with a parting blessing taken from the last verse of 2 Corinthians: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen” (52).<sup>3</sup>

By framing her *Memoirs* with a dedication letter in the style of a Pauline epistle, Elaw positions herself as an apostle and her autobiography as a missionary text. That is, she prepares her readers for a narrative of her personal journey of Christian discipleship along with an account of her public missionary journeys to “preach Christ, and Him crucified” (140). Her book itself is also an instrument of ministry; by infusing her dedication with Pauline language, Elaw sets up theological and rhetorical expectations to be fulfilled in the rest of her text. In fact, as this chapter will argue, Elaw takes up two

---

<sup>2</sup> Some iteration of the phrase “Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ” can be found at the beginning of each of Paul’s letters (and those that have been attributed to him). As Paula Fredriksen notes, “Ancient Christian tradition ascribed fourteen of the twenty-seven writings comprising the New Testament to Paul. Modern scholarship accepts as definitely Pauline only half that number: 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, Galatians, and Romans (in probable order of composition). The Pauline authorship of all the others—2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus—is disputed; that of Hebrews, dismissed” (53).

<sup>3</sup> See 2 Corinthians 13.14. This benediction is unique among Paul’s letters because all three persons of the holy trinity are invoked (Coogan 308 NT).

key principles of Pauline theology to interpret her own experiences and draw her readers to Christ: first, the idea that those who embrace Christ become “adopted” children of God through the Holy Spirit, and second, the precept that those who are baptized in Christ become one in the Spirit, members of one “body” (the church).<sup>4</sup> In Elaw’s text, these two principles come together at crucial moments in her use of the language of “adoption.” Through this language, Elaw variously claims God as her holy parent when she has no other guardian to confide in, counteracts racial and gender prejudice, underscores the importance of her ministry to the family of God (while downplaying her responsibilities to her earthly family), explains the importance of sanctification as a prerequisite for ministry, and proclaims the ideal of a single, unified church in Christ across denominations. For Elaw, the agency of the Holy Spirit is crucial to the believer’s enjoyment of the “spirit of adoption.” Elaw presents the Spirit as an indwelling force that frees the believer from sin, animates personal devotion and public worship, and facilitates interpersonal and social relationships. Ascribing such power to God through the Holy Spirit allows Elaw to keep the reader focused on God’s message as exemplified in her life and work, as she says, for God’s glory rather than her own (68, 70).

Beginning with the very first page of her text, Elaw assiduously maintains that her authority to speak comes from God and that any ministerial competency she might possess is God-given, not the result of her own talent or abilities. On the title page of her *Memoirs*, Elaw includes an epigraph that testifies to God’s power: “‘Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God,’ 2 Cor. iii. 5” (49). In her dedication, Elaw continues this theme by adopting more of Paul’s

---

<sup>4</sup> For the concept of “adoption,” see Romans 8.14-15 and 8.23, Galatians 4.4-6, and Ephesians 1.4-6. For the metaphor of the church as “one body,” see 1 Corinthians 12.12-27; also see Ephesians 4.4 and Colossians 3.15.

self-effacing sentiments from the book of 2 Corinthians and adapting imagery from the Song of Solomon. She offers her book to her English “Brethren and Friends” in visual terms, saying:

I feel that I cannot present you with a more appropriate keepsake, or a more lively memento of my Christian esteem...than the following contour portrait of my regenerated constitution—exhibiting, as did the bride of Solomon, comeliness with blackness [Song of Sol. 1:5]; and, as did the apostle Paul, riches with poverty, and power in weakness [2 Cor. 12:9]—a representation, not, indeed, of the features of my outward person, drawn and coloured by the skill of the pencilling [sic] artist, but of the lineaments of my *inward man*, as inscribed by the Holy Ghost, and, according to my poor ability, copied off for your edification. (emphasis added, 51)

By juxtaposing biblical citations to create parallel word pairings (comeliness/blackness, riches/poverty, power/weakness), Elaw suggests that her combined race and gender status, which readers might consider as detracting from her message, is actually a source of strength.<sup>5</sup> That God can make use of her despite her low position as a black woman is a great testament to God’s power, as Elaw is quick to point out in numerous places throughout her autobiography (“the weakness and incompetency of the poor coloured female but the more displayed the excellency of the power to be of God,” [sic] 92). But Elaw does not want to linger over her physical attributes and outward self-presentation; she goes on to explain that her book is really a portrait of her inner life. Employing the phrase “inward man,” Elaw again relies on Pauline language to describe her literary project, drawing from a verse that explains how Jesus’ death and resurrection makes possible the spiritual life of the believer: “though our outward man perish, yet the *inward man* is renewed day by day” (my emphasis, 2 Cor. 4.16). Through successive layers of

---

<sup>5</sup> In *Written By Herself*, Frances Smith Foster puts it like this: “Zilpha Elaw carefully constructs herself as a comely black woman whose economic poverty and political weakness has endowed her with a wealth of spiritual insight and moral power. Elaw’s narrative demonstrates an important feature of African American woman’s literature by asserting the importance of race and gender to definitions and experiences even when neither of those is the focus of the work” (84-85).

scriptural references, Elaw suggests that her own spiritual progression can serve as a model for the “progressive prosperity and perfection in the Christian calling” that she wishes for her readers, yet she also avoids self-aggrandizement by emphasizing the role of the Spirit in the authorship of her text, “as inscribed by the Holy Ghost” (51). In doing so, Elaw seems to celebrate her “regenerated” inner self, spiritually born again through the sufficiency of God’s grace—the full text of 2 Cor. 12.9 reads, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness”—and dedicated to God and to the “edification” of her readers.

From the outset, Elaw performs rhetorical acts of submission to the Holy Spirit, incorporates various Bible verses and hymn stanzas into her text, and attempts to explain the meaning of her religious calling, extrasensory experiences, and itinerancy. She also models critical reading practices, encouraging her readers to “carefully read, study, and digest [the Holy Scriptures], especially the title-deeds of the Christian covenant” (such as Paul’s writings) and reminding them that waywardness and disobedience to God can cloud the “mental vision” of the believer, causing him/her to “fail of reading the Lord’s indications” (52, 102-103). Thus, Elaw’s *Memoirs* constitute a quintessential example of autotheography as both a subgenre of spiritual autobiography and a theological process of meaning-making, weaving together multiple sources to present a unique portrait of the “regenerated” subject—a portrait drawn simultaneously by the Holy Spirit and the writer/believer. Announcing herself as an adopted child of God, Elaw gives her readers the information necessary to also become children of God through grace in the “spirit of adoption,” claiming a spiritual “inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (52).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Although she does not use quotation marks or cite her source, Elaw directly borrows from Acts 20.32 in the penultimate paragraph of her dedication. Interestingly, this chapter of Acts finds Paul about to set sail

But what was Elaw's particular understanding of the relationship between God's grace, sanctification, the Holy Spirit, and the "spirit of adoption"? And how did embracing the "spirit of adoption" affect Elaw's relationships with her family members, both earthly and spiritual? To answer these questions, we will start with Elaw's conversion and introduction to Methodism, examining the life events and narrative machinations that draw her closer to her "heavenly Father" and reveal the Holy Spirit as her theological instructor. Next we will look at two mystical experiences essential to Elaw's later ministry—sanctification and commission—that put pressure on her relationship with her husband even as they deepened her connection to the Holy Spirit. Finally, we will return to Elaw's Pauline theology to investigate the radical potential of the "spirit of adoption" as a unifying spirit, cutting across the boundaries of race, gender, and denominational divisions.

### **Becoming an "Adopted Child of Divine Love": Elaw's Conversion**

According to biographical information presented in her *Memoirs*, Zilpha Elaw was born to free parents in Pennsylvania in the last decade of the eighteenth century, one of only three of her parents' twenty-two children to survive infancy. When Elaw was twelve, her mother passed away in childbirth. Her father then placed her as a servant in a white Quaker household. Not even two years later, her father also died. Without her parents, Elaw had no choice but to stay on as a domestic with her "kind benefactors" until she was eighteen (53). The more detail Elaw gives regarding her Quaker "benefactors,"

---

for Jerusalem, bidding farewell to a group of Christians among whom he has worked for three years. The similarities between Paul's departure and her own impending journey across the Atlantic after her missionary activities in England may have resonated with Elaw.

however, the more it seems that they left much to be desired in her eyes. While Elaw remembers “family devotion” as a lively, rewarding daily activity in her parents’ home, Quaker devotions “were performed in the secret silence of the mind,” making it difficult for the young Elaw to feel comfortable in her new surroundings (54). As a result, Elaw claims, she was left to her own devices and fell into sinful habits and imprudent behavior, even going so far as to take God’s name in vain (54).

Despite her irreligious acts, Elaw writes that God did not abandon her during this difficult period. Instead, her “heavenly Father” reached out to her in the form of a terrifying dream wherein judgment day had arrived and she felt herself unready to appear before Him (55). Apparently, this dream unsettled the fourteen-year-old Elaw so much that her mistress noticed a change in her manner and asked what was the matter. When Elaw explained her dream, she was told not to worry about it: “dreams have nothing ominous in them” (55). Elaw presents her mistress as spiritually clueless, here; as a mature Christian narrator interpreting the thoughts of her adolescent self, Elaw asserts, “[my mistress] failed in her attempt to tranquilize my mind, because the convictions of my sinfulness in the sight of God, and incompetency to meet my Judge, were immovable and distressing” (55). The matter-of-fact tone of this passage suggests Elaw felt there was, indeed, something to worry about if God was sending her dreams that “aroused and alarmed [her] spirit” (55); her very soul was at stake.

According to her narrative, Elaw finally experienced conversion—reassurance that God heard her prayers and had forgiven her sins—through a vision of Jesus coming toward her and smiling as if to say, “I own thy name” (56). Immediately after giving a brief description of this vision, Elaw interrupts the flow of her narration to anticipate the

possible objections of skeptical readers: “Some persons, perhaps, may be incredulous, and say, ‘How can these things be, and in what form did He appear?’ Dear reader, whoever thou art, into whose hands this narrative may fall, I will try to gratify thee by endeavouring to describe his manifestation” (56). Elaw sets the scene: there she was in a cow stall, going about the daily chore of milking while singing to herself a hymn (fittingly, “Oh, when shall I see Jesus”), when Jesus appeared before her.<sup>7</sup> She substantiates this vision by noting that the cow “turned her head and looked round” at the approaching figure, too: “and when [the beast] saw, she bowed her knees and cowered upon the ground” (57). Elaw reasons that the cow would not have responded thus if the heavenly manifestation had only been in “the eye of [her] mind” (56).

Rhetorically, this visionary encounter with Jesus gives Elaw the opportunity to portray herself as a reliable narrator, solemnly pledging herself to her readers in the language of jurisprudence: “I write as before God and Christ, and declare, as I shall give an account to my Judge at the great day, that every thing I have written in this little book, has been written with conscientious veracity and scrupulous adherence to the truth” (57). No longer the teenage girl who lightly took God’s name in vain and dreamed she was unfit to meet her maker, the fifty-something Elaw narrating her autobiography demonstrates just how much she has grown spiritually by proclaiming the authenticity of her words before the Father and Son whom she will no longer fear at judgment day. Through this declarative act, Elaw affirms the accuracy of her narrative, all but signing her name on the line as she puts God in the role of notary and her readers in the role of

---

<sup>7</sup> Elaw includes the first stanza of a hymn attributed to John Leland (*NetHymnal*).

witnesses to (and beneficiaries of) the contract.<sup>8</sup> By invoking the “truth-value” of her text, Elaw participates in one of the most familiar conventions of the autobiographical genre: the presupposition that “information and events reported in connection with the autobiographer are asserted to have been, to be, or to have potential for being the case,” even if said events would be impossible to observe or prove (Bruss 11). Elaw also demonstrates that she firmly believes in her spiritual experiences and has the authority and wherewithal to interpret them in “unvarnished” prose (57).

Having thoroughly elucidated her conversion experience, Elaw resumes the discussion of her continuing run-ins with her mistress. Even after a significant change in her behavior resulting from her Christian conversion—Elaw notes, “the evil propensities of my disposition and temper were subdued beneath the softening and refining pressure of divine grace upon my heart”—her mistress treated her poorly (57). Evidently, Elaw could not win: before her conversion, Elaw’s boisterousness caused her mistress to accuse her of “pertness and insolent behaviour,” and afterward, her changed deportment was deemed “sullenness and mopishness [sic]” (59).

At this turning point in her text, Elaw avails herself of numerous Bible verses to show that God nurtured her during this time of strife. Like Moses, she was “hid in the cleft of the rock” (Exodus 33.22); like Paul, she “put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13.11); like a lamb, she was carried in the “bosom” of her shepherd (Isaiah 40.11) (58). As Elaw constructs it, God was the only witness to her tears, the only person to give ear to her sufferings: “There were no persons in the house in which I resided, to whom I

---

<sup>8</sup> Although I am using Elaw’s diction as evidence for her “contract,” I am indebted to Philippe Lejeune’s conception of the implicit contract, or “autobiographical pact,” between the reader and the “author-narrator-protagonist” whose name (signature) appears on the title page as a testament to the authenticity of the author (13-14).



could at any time open my mind...and amongst them I dwelt as a speckled bird” (58-59). By describing herself as a “speckled bird,” Elaw alludes to a particular verse befitting her situation: “Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her” (Jer. 12.9a). Elaw clearly felt like an outsider, singled out for the “speckled” qualities that separated her from the “birds” around her who belittled her for being different. The word “speckled” might have racial implications to Elaw, as a “speckled” animal can be described as having different markings or coloring than other animals of its kind, and Elaw likely felt alienated as a black young woman serving in a white household (“Speckle,” *American Dictionary*). Elaw is also using the phrase “speckled bird” in the sense of “a person who differs so much from the company he is in as to be an object of suspicion or distrust,” since her mistress had little regard for her and found fault with her behavior no matter what (“Speckled Bird,” *American Dictionary*). In any case, surrounded by adversaries, Elaw says she had no one to turn to but her heavenly parent. Like the aggrieved speaker of the chapter of Jeremiah that Elaw drew her “speckled bird” simile from, Elaw seems to be asking God, “Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?” (Jer. 12.1b).

At this textual juncture, Elaw brings the reader into her writing present, keenly feeling the absence of her parents a second time as she narrates her past woes. Elaw indicates that her living situation during her teenage years did not come close to approximating the love and tenderness she would have experienced had her parents lived longer. In particular, the mature Elaw expresses grief as she recalls the mindset of her younger self “bitterly” missing her mother, which causes her to remark in the vocative present tense: “Oh, how often do I think of the advantages enjoyed by many young

people...blessed with devout and godly parents...who, instead of greatly prizing the grace conferred upon them, resent the kind restraints of family worship and attendance at the house of God” (59). Elaw admonishes any “perverse and giddy” youngsters who may be reading her text to mend their ways and realize what a great treasure they have inherited through their religious parents (59).

Although Elaw did not have the benefit of her parents’ instruction during adolescence, she maintains that she found hope and solace by joining a Methodist class meeting in the area in 1808 (57).<sup>9</sup> She had to travel on foot two miles each way through the woods at night past two graveyards in order to attend this meeting, which might seem lonely, frightening, or dangerous for a young woman (60). (Indeed, Elaw informs her English readers that “a two miles journey in the more rural territories of the United States, is very different from the same distance along the streets or well frequented roads of England,” 60.) Yet she explains that, while she had been “superstitious” and afraid of the dark before her conversion, she had no fear after Jesus appeared to her in the cow stall (59). Trusting God to protect her, the walks to and from her class meeting became joyous experiences of communication with her heavenly Father:

I enjoyed richly the spirit of adoption: knowing myself to be an adopted child of divine love, I claimed God as my Father, and his Son Jesus as my dear friend, who adhered to me more faithfully in goodness than a brother: and with my blessed Saviour, Redeemer, Intercessor, and Patron, I enjoyed a delightful heavenly communion.... (60)

This passage is the first time that Elaw employs “adoption” language in her text; as stated at the beginning of this chapter, “adoption” is a key theological trope for Elaw across her

---

<sup>9</sup> For information on the various functions of Methodist class meetings in black and biracial churches during the nineteenth century, see Collier-Thomas (31-32).

*Memoirs*. In this instance, Elaw utilizes phraseology from Romans to establish her place as a child in the family of God through the “spirit of adoption” (Rom. 8.15).

Interestingly, Elaw does not quote the ending of the verse in Romans 8 wherein the phrase “the spirit of adoption” appears, nor the verse immediately after it. However, the spirit of her diction in the above passage, together with later references in her text to verses and topics from Romans 8, makes it reasonable to read the verses surrounding the “spirit of adoption” phrase to give better context from a book of the Bible that Elaw obviously knew well and probably expected her readers to be familiar with, too. These verses read, “...ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8.15b-16). The words “Abba, Father” are significant because they were purportedly spoken by Jesus addressing God his Father (“Abba” means “Father” in Aramaic) when praying in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his execution (Mark 14.36; Coogan 254 NT). The parallels between Elaw and Jesus are important; just as Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father in a personal way during a time of “trial” and “temptation,” Elaw also prayed to God her Father when “Satan...assailed [her] with various trials and temptations” such as the difficulties she suffered at the hands of her Quaker mistress (Mark 14.38; Elaw 58).<sup>10</sup> Coming right on the heels of Elaw’s commentary on the toxic atmosphere of her mistress’s household, Elaw’s proclamation of “God as [her] Father” and Jesus as “more...than a brother” takes on significance unique to her situation. The contrast between her earthly mistress and her heavenly Father could hardly be plainer.

---

<sup>10</sup> The word for “trial” or “temptation” is variously translated in different versions of the Bible. In the *King James Version*, Mark 14.38a reads: “Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation” (*Holy Bible*). The *New Revised Standard Version* reads: “Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial” (Coogan). Jesus wants his disciples to stay up with him during his hour of need, but the disciples prove naïve and inept (as usual in the drama of Mark, the disciples miss the point).

Elaw summarizes the three years following her conversion by stating that God became her spiritual mentor and educator, “instructing me by his Holy Spirit, in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures” (60). Similar to Rebecca Cox Jackson’s assertion that God used “dreams and visions and revelations and gifts” to instruct her when no human could (Jackson 96), Elaw continues, “It was not by the aid of human instruments that I was first drawn to Christ; and it was by the Lord alone that I was upheld, confirmed, instructed, sanctified, and directed” (Elaw 60). Even so, Elaw underscores the importance of certain “human instruments” by mentioning two Methodist class leaders who were important to her religious development. Immediately after her conversion, Elaw “went up formally to present [her] hand to the brethren, and [her] heart for ever to the Lord” by giving her testimony in a class meeting under the direction of the Rev. J. Polhemos, an itinerant minister (57). Later, after a six-month probationary period, Elaw was baptized “into the one body of Jesus” by the Rev. Joseph Lybrand and became “a full member of the [Methodist] society” (60, 61).

The end of this chapter will revisit the biblical metaphor Elaw uses to comment on her own baptism (“Truly the one Spirit of Jesus doth by means of His ministers, baptise [sic] us into the *one body* of Jesus. 1 Cor. xii. 13”; emphasis added, 60), examining Elaw’s take on God’s vision for the “body” of the church across denominations. For now, it is important to note that Elaw’s narrative actually presents two avenues through which she became “an adopted child of divine love” (60). The first avenue is her conversion, a justification by faith confirmed by both her mystical vision of Jesus and through the testimony she gave before the members of her Methodist class meeting. The second avenue is baptism, a ritual consecrating her to “the Father, Son, and

Holy Ghost” and sealing her membership in the family of God (as Elaw notes, baptism allows her to participate in the ritual of communion, also called the “Lord’s Supper,” 61). In a sense, God’s love gives Elaw comfort in the form of a heavenly Father and leads her to find a “happy home” among Methodists, an adoptive family replacing the one she lost when her parents passed away and making up for what she had to endure as a servant in the household of a demanding mistress (61). Indeed, as Elaw demonstrates in the next part of her *Memoirs*, she prized her intimate connection with God and worked hard to maintain relationships with her “adopted” brothers and sisters in Christ, prioritizing the work she felt God calling her to do above all else. Her spiritual family took precedence over her earthly family.

### **“The Lord Opened My Mouth in Public Prayer”: Elaw’s Sanctification and Commission**

In the nearly twenty-five pages of Zilpha Elaw’s *Memoirs* that cover the years of her life during which she was married to Joseph Elaw (from their marriage in 1810 until Joseph’s death on January 27, 1823), there are no direct references to spiritual “adoption” (pages 61-85). Although the lack of “adoption” language in the pages that correspond with her narration of the twelve-year period of her marriage is likely inadvertent, it is nevertheless an extraordinary, provocative coincidence. By her own account, Elaw made the mistake of marrying a man who was considered “very respectable...in the general acceptance of the term,” but he turned out to be a Christian in name only, not a true believer living in the Spirit according to Christ’s teachings (61). In short, in Elaw’s opinion, Joseph had not experienced a sincere conversion that would have made him a

child of God (63). Worse still, after their first year of marriage, Joseph stopped even pretending to change his life and accept Christianity, actively opposing the exercise of his wife's faith: "he resolved to use every means to induce me to renounce my religion, and abolish my attendance at the meeting-house" (Elaw 63). To say the least, Elaw characterizes her marriage as an exceptional challenge to her belief system. By being "unequally yoked" to an unbeliever, Elaw feels she cannot fulfill her wifely scriptural duty and be her husband's "help-meet" (61-62).<sup>11</sup>

Given Elaw's later career as an itinerant minister who preached all over the Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic, and Southern (slaveholding) states and eventually embarked on a mission to England, it might be perplexing that someone so competent and strong-minded would espouse views that seem to limit her independence, such as, "That woman is dependant on and subject to man, is the dictate of nature; that the man is not created for the woman, but the woman for the man, is that of Scripture [1 Cor. 11:9]" (61-62). Although this sentence may sound extreme, it is helpful to keep in mind that Elaw's line of reasoning is based on a chapter from 1 Corinthians that also states, "the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11.3). This chain of headship—God, Christ, man, woman—does not seem to be a simple hierarchy for Elaw. She goes on to explain that an ideal Christian marriage is characterized by "mutual sympathy and affectionate accordance" because "both parties are cordially progressing on the king's highway" (62). Both husband and wife, then, are subject to God, and traveling Christ's road together. Moreover, we should keep in mind

---

<sup>11</sup> Elaw refers to concepts from 2 Cor. 6.14 ("Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?") and Gen. 2.18 ("And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him").

that “subjection” is not a dirty word to Elaw. Her epigraph confirms her view that autonomy and self-reliance are not the most important qualities for Christians; on the contrary, “sufficiency” comes from God (49).

Elaw’s discussion of marriage as a God-ordained institution that her husband does not live up to permits her to disengage from her husband—textually, at least, since she did not actually leave or divorce him. Though she believes in a scriptural basis for male headship, she cannot properly submit to her husband because he is not a Christian. Instead, she focuses on her submission to her heavenly Father. In Elaw’s narrative, nothing keeps her from her relationship with God, at least not for long. Even a life-threatening illness could serve as a reminder to practice “absolute submission to the will of God” (76). For instance, at one point in 1819 when Elaw thought she was on her deathbed, she had a discussion with her husband about the fate of their seven-year-old daughter, a discussion born out of a mother’s “natural anxiety” for the welfare of her child (76). According to Elaw, this incident made her realize that earthly familial bonds could become a hindrance to her relationship with her heavenly Father. “I then, in prayer, pledged myself afresh to God, begging that he would effectually wean me from all the excesses of nature’s ties” (76). As this scene demonstrates, in Elaw’s view, anything that stands between her and God must be surrendered.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of her text, with God’s help, Elaw overcomes her husband’s hostility, financial difficulties, illness, self-doubt, and other threats to her person and ministry, and each victory brings her that much

---

<sup>12</sup> Elaw’s desire to surrender everything to God was echoed by other holiness women during the nineteenth century. Following theologian Diane Cunningham Leclerc, Susie Stanley points out that Phoebe Palmer—one of the most influential proponents of holiness during the nineteenth century, a key evangelist, thinker, and writer on the doctrine of Christian perfection—made sure to put God first, “laying all on the altar [including] her children and her husband. This did not mean she would no longer love them, but rather that love for them would not surpass her love for God” (Stanley 82). For more on Phoebe Palmer’s “altar” theology, see Palmer, “Lay Your All upon the Altar” (230-231, Document 6 in chapter five of *In Our Own Voices*, “Evangelical Women”), Hardesty (40-41), Stanley (71-73), and Raser (36, 159-161, 171-173).

closer to God. Joycelyn Moody's point about the rhetorical function of Elaw's struggles with her husband can be applied to all the obstacles Elaw faces: "Her autobiographical accounts of [her husband's] impediments clearly function to cast her story as the more laudable, her God the more impressive" (60). The more obedient Elaw is to God's "heavenly direction," the more wonders she experiences (Elaw 69).

In fact, throughout her *Memoirs*, Elaw describes numerous experiences where she intensely feels God's presence and direction in her life. Perhaps the two most momentous and mystical of these are her sanctification and commission. Significantly, both of these events take place in a setting that her husband has "an extravagant prejudice against": the camp meeting (79). As social historian of religion David Hempton explains, camp meetings in the United States "became a normal part of the Methodist experience, as much on the eastern seaboard as on the expanding frontier" (80). Thousands of people would come to a pre-determined rural location and set up their tents around a common area where worship would take place throughout the day and long into the night; preaching, praying, exhorting, singing, shouting, and ecstatic movement were all part of the mix (Frey and Wood 140-141; Hempton 80). Elaw goes into great detail to describe the revival atmosphere of these events, as well as the layout of tents, seating, and preaching platforms. She refers to the camp as a "City of the Lord," similar to "God's ancient and holy hill of Zion on her brightest festival days" (65).

In the hyper-charged, Spirit-filled atmosphere of an 1817 camp meeting, Elaw says she experienced sanctification. Generally, sanctification refers to an experience of grace that goes beyond conversion, setting the believer apart for a holy life free from intentional sin. Elaw describes sanctification as a process that continually renews the



believer through “the indwelling presence and superintending sway of the Holy Spirit in a clean and obedient heart” (68). However, this process must begin at some point, and Elaw gives a detailed account of the moment when she first obtained sanctification. She describes an overwhelming out-of-body experience during which a voice clearly said to her, ““Now thou art sanctified; and I will show thee what thou must do”” (66). Coming out of this “trance or ecstasy,” she continued to feel the intensity of God’s presence close to her, extending the extrasensory episode: “Truly I durst not move, because God was so powerfully near to me; for the space of several hours I appeared not to be on earth, but far above all earthly things” (67). To help explain the “solemn stillness” she felt in this moment, Elaw quotes two lines from a hymn by Charles Wesley: ““The speechless awe that dares not move, / And all the silent heaven of love”” (67). These lines are from a two-part hymn that tells a single story of reconciliation between sinners and God (“Sinners, Obey the Gospel Word” and “Come, O Ye Sinners, to the Lord”). The first part uses one of Wesley’s most beloved texts, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32), putting the words of the prodigal’s father into the mouths of the three persons of the Trinity, ready to reclaim the lost sinner as a child of God:

The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
Are ready, with their shining host:  
All heaven is ready to resound,  
“The dead’s alive! the lost is found!” (hymn 350, stanza 5)<sup>13</sup>

The second part of this hymn extends the theme of God’s offer to restore the sinner through grace, celebrating the peace that comes with “The mystic joys of penitence” (hymn 351, stanza 2). These “mystic joys” that mesmerize the redeemed when in God’s

---

<sup>13</sup> Charles Wesley referenced the prodigal son fourteen times in his extant sermons (Tyson 487). For another of Charles’s extended meditations on the prodigal son, see the hymn “Of Thanksgiving to the Father” (Tyson 121-122). For other biblical themes important to Charles Wesley see Appendix A, “Charles Wesley’s Favorite Sermon Texts,” in *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (Tyson 487-490).

presence are precisely what Elaw wants to evoke by quoting lines from this particular hymn, since the thralldom Wesley describes is consistent with her sanctification experience.

In addition, by choosing lines from a hymn by Charles Wesley for this scene, Elaw potentially gives us insight into her own sanctification theology.<sup>14</sup> Although Charles Wesley is better remembered as a Methodist hymnodist than as a theologian—his older brother, John, is generally credited as the founder of Methodism and the driving force behind Methodist theology—Charles was an important religious thinker in his own right, disseminating key biblical insights through itinerant preaching earlier in his career and through hymn-writing in the latter part of his life (Tyson 11, 14). According to John R. Tyson, Charles Wesley emphasized the action of the Holy Spirit on the believer, defining “sanctification under the impact of the doctrine of the Trinity” (45). For Charles, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were all important to the process of Christian perfection: “sanctification as ‘Perfect Love’ looked to ‘Love’ as the Divine essence to explain how God or Christ was formed within the Christian through the workings of the Holy Spirit” (Tyson 47). Similarly, Elaw understands her sanctification as facilitated by the Holy Spirit: “I clearly saw by the light of the Holy Ghost, that my heart and soul were rendered completely spotless” (67). Elaw recognizes the action of the Holy Spirit again in the direction that God gives her immediately after experiencing sanctification, when “the Lord opened [her] mouth in public prayer” and also allowed her to lead others in prayer

---

<sup>14</sup> If the hymn fragments Elaw intersperses in her *Memoirs* are any indicator, Charles Wesley was her favorite hymnodist. Although Elaw does not give titles or author names for any of these fragments, I have been able to identify thirteen of the seventeen fragments. According to my research, at least six of these were authored by Charles Wesley. Elaw also includes lines written by other hymnodists beloved by Methodists such as Isaac Watts, Thomas Ken, Robert Robinson, and Thomas Olivers, but none of these hymnodists are featured more than once.

(67). She explains, “before the meeting at this camp closed, it was revealed to me by the Holy Spirit, that like another Phoebe...I must employ myself in visiting families...and attend upon other of the errands and services of the Lord” (67). As Elaw lays out this sequence of events, it becomes clear that the Holy Spirit’s ministrations to her soul through sanctification enable her to begin ministering to others. Elaw takes up this “family or household ministry” for five years (71), until God calls her to a larger public vocation—preaching the gospel as an itinerant minister (73).

By likening herself to Phoebe, Elaw joins the ranks of nineteenth-century women who justified their roles as religious leaders by looking to female role models in the Bible, particularly women in the New Testament who served as apostles (Hardesty 63). As historian Nancy Hardesty points out, these women “knew that King James’s translators had done all women a disservice by calling Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 a ‘servant’ when Paul called her a ‘deacon’ or minister” (63). A generation after Elaw, Julia Foote directly mentions the case of Phoebe in her spiritual autobiography when discussing gender-biased translation issues; she continues, sarcastically, “When Paul said, ‘Help those women who labor with me in the Gospel,’ he certainly meant that they did more than to pour out tea” (209). Similarly, Elaw mentions Phoebe a second time in her *Memoirs* as part of a long list of “Christian females who promote the cause of Jesus” in the Bible (124). However, Elaw glosses over the translation issues surrounding the particular descriptor for Phoebe’s role by giving both alternatives: “St. Paul himself attests that Phoebe was a *servant* or *deaconess* of the Church at Cenchrea; and as such was employed by the Church to manage some of their affairs” (emphasis added, 124). Ultimately, even though Elaw concedes that “the Apostle Paul laid it down as a rule, that

females should not speak in the church, nor be suffered to teach,” she emphasizes that the action of the Holy Spirit supersedes this rule (124). Citing the realization of Joel’s prophecy through Pentecost (“your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,” Joel 2.28 and Acts 2.16-18), Elaw concludes: “the Christian dispensation has for its main feature the inspirations of the holy prophetic Spirit, descending on the handmaids as well as on the servants of God; and thus qualifying both for the conversion of men, and spread of the Gospel” (124). To sum up Elaw’s position, the message of the New Testament is dependent on the remarkable power of the Spirit as “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10.34). The Spirit commissions both genders to preach the gospel.

According to Elaw, the “energies of the Holy Spirit” were instrumental at a camp meeting where she received her commission to become an evangelist, just two years after she received the blessing of sanctification (82). As with her sanctification experience, Elaw heard a voice that provided her with spiritual direction. This time, however, the Spirit seems to prompt her from within, causing her to begin exhorting those around her “with a loud voice” (82). The way Elaw tells it, the Holy Spirit virtually took possession of her body and words seemed to pour out of her mouth, “as it were involuntarily” (82).<sup>15</sup> Notice Elaw’s commentary on the significance of this entire scene: she notes that her commission came from God, “not from mortal man”; she makes much of the camp-meeting setting, pointing out that her “ministry was commenced in the midst of thousands who were both eye and ear witnesses of the fact”; and, finally, her reflections bring her back to the present, as she exclaims, “Oh, adorable Trinity! dispose me to do thy holy

---

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of spirit possession as a legacy from West Africa, see Albert Raboteau (*Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, 1978). Drawing on Raboteau and others, Yolanda Pierce claims, “the centrality of women as ritual leaders within African religious tradition found an echo in the prominence of black female believers like Zilpha Elaw as exhorters within the revival setting” (104).

will in all things” (82). Narratively, the Holy Spirit’s agency gives Elaw great religious insight, strengthens her to do God’s work, and gives her a sense of soul-transpiring wonderment that practically exceeds her ability to write about it. Just as she did after her initial conversion, Elaw finds her “joy in the Holy Ghost” after her sanctification and commission to be “unutterable by my tongue and indescribable by my pen,” even though she is clearly speaking and writing that joy by testifying to its inexpressibility (57). For Elaw, as for Charles Wesley, many words are needed to testify to the ineffable beauty of the Holy Spirit’s work in drawing the believer into the family of God and closer to the glorious Trinity.

Although Elaw’s commission gave her a new role in God’s family, her earthly family was another matter. Not surprisingly—at this point in her text, the reader could hardly be startled by this turn of events—Elaw states that her husband did not approve of her new preaching career. Given the groundwork laid, Elaw’s response to her husband’s disapproval is predictable, too: “I was very sorry to see [my husband] so much grieved...but my heavenly Father had informed me that he had a great work for me to do; I could not therefore descend down to the counsel of flesh and blood, but adhered faithfully to my commission” (84). Elizabeth Elkin Grammer has observed that, in the autobiographical narratives of nineteenth-century women who felt God’s call to itinerant ministry, these exchanges between a commissioned wife and her disapproving husband lead to unavoidable outcomes:

At times in these narratives the relationship between the evangelist’s frustrated will and the husband’s untimely death starts to look like cause and effect: when Zilpha Elaw details her husband’s opposition to her new role as “public speaker,” we are not surprised to hear her immediately report, “My poor husband’s health about this time began visibly to decline” (84). (Grammer 39)

Elaw reports that her husband finally succumbed to consumption after a long period of sickness (84-85). Even near the end, Elaw seems to have been uncertain about the state of her husband's soul; although she notes that he apologized to her for his past behavior and that a "calmness and sweetness" eventually came over him, she does not give the reader full assurance of his salvation (84). As a substitute for a spiritual deathbed scene, Elaw includes another hymn fragment as a placeholder for her husband's reconciliation with God: "'Above the rest this note shall swell, / My Jesus hath done all things well'" (84).<sup>16</sup> Metaphorically, this "note" seems to soar above all of the discord of Elaw's marriage to remind her that her husband was in God's hands.

Elaw may not have known whether or not her husband was ultimately reconciled with God, but she verifies that her daughter enjoyed the "spirit of adoption" in her late teens. In fact, Elaw explains that she herself was the instrument God used to "capture [her] own daughter in the gospel net" at a camp meeting in Oyster Bay, New York, around 1830 (103). Long before her conversion, however, Elaw's daughter is portrayed as a staunch supporter of her mother's ministerial labors. Even when Elaw left her daughter behind with a relative in order to answer God's call and begin a self-supported, Spirit-directed itinerant ministry in earnest, she records her daughter as saying, "'do not think any thing about me [mother], for I shall do very well'" (89). As a character in Elaw's *Memoirs*, her daughter brings together the potentially conflicting responsibilities Elaw feels as a biological mother and a spiritual mother. Nowhere is this fusion more evident than in her daughter's conversion scene.

---

<sup>16</sup> According to the *NetHymnal* online, this hymn, "Praise God for What He's Done for Me," was first published in *A Collection of Revival Hymns, Adapted to Popular Airs* (1844)—author unknown.

Elaw explains that she was preaching “in the midst of hundreds” at a camp meeting when her daughter began to feel the full weight of her sins and cried aloud to the Lord for mercy (103). The text Elaw was expounding on that day, Deuteronomy 5.29, is so perfect for the scene, it seems like it could have been written just for Elaw and her daughter, since it concerns both the covenant between God and humanity and the responsibility of parents to teach their children God’s commandments. In this text, God says (through the mouthpiece of Moses): “O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!” (Deut. 5.29). Elaw reports that her daughter was converted “under this discourse,” which electrified the congregation when they learned that the young woman before them being slain in the Spirit was her only child (103). Elaw goes on to explain that she had to balance the natural, personal sympathy she felt for her daughter with her public ministerial role: “Many a mother strongly felt with me on that occasion; and though my position would not allow me to leave the pulpit, to go and pour the oil of consolation into her wounded spirit, yet, thank God, there were abundance of dear friends present who were ready for every good word and work” (103). It is interesting that Elaw felt constrained by her leadership position in this moment, particularly since it was not unusual for a minister to come down from the pulpit to the mourner’s bench, “a twenty- or thirty-foot space separating the raised platform of the pulpit from the seated worshippers,” in order to pray with those who were undergoing the transformation from sinner to child of God (Pierce 101). Perhaps Elaw felt that she needed to continue preaching on the text at hand rather than interrupt her sermon to single her daughter out from among the “listening hundreds” (103). In any case, the many

“dear friends” who surrounded and uplifted Elaw’s daughter were an integral part of her conversion.<sup>17</sup> Although Elaw reminds her readers that “the conversion of a soul is not to be effected by the mere effort of man; none but God can communicate a full pardon to the guilty soul,” it is hard not to be impressed by Elaw’s ministrations to her camp meeting congregation and, in turn, their ministrations to her daughter (103). The Holy Spirit may have done the heavy lifting, but Elaw’s efforts were vital to the process.

Elaw closes this scene in her *Memoirs* by summing up her daughter’s conversion in phraseology drawn from two of her favorite Pauline verses, saying, “the Spirit of adoption was imparted to [my daughter]; she rejoiced in the Lord with all her soul; and His love was shed abroad in her heart by the Holy Ghost” (103; see Romans 5.5 and 8.15).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Elaw bookends her daughter’s conversion scene with Pauline language that highlights the Holy Spirit’s validation of Christians as God’s children. The last sentence prior to her daughter’s conversion scene reads: “In all the errands on which the Lord has been graciously pleased to send me for the proclamation of His gospel, my work has been attended with the witness of His Spirit, and He hath given seals to my ministry, and souls for my hire” (103). By using the phrase “witness of His Spirit,” Elaw echoes Romans 8.16: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.”<sup>19</sup> As Elaw constructs it, her daughter is a decisive “seal” to her

---

<sup>17</sup> As Frey and Wood have suggested in *Come Shouting to Zion*, “For African Americans, if not for all white evangelicals, conversion was often a ritual of collective catharsis and collective commitment that was performed collaboratively.” (123). For more on interactions between black and white participants in camp-meeting spaces where social boundaries could crumble, see Pierce (98-103).

<sup>18</sup> In his sermon “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” John Wesley puts these two scriptures together (Romans 5.5 and 8.15), reading them as part of a unified, active “Spirit” (262). The texts of Wesley’s sermons often layer Bible verses fast and thick, and Elaw’s *Memoirs* sometimes have a similar feel, synthesizing many verses in support of a larger theme. Elaw does not mention John Wesley or any of his sermons in her text, but as a Methodist, she would likely have been familiar with John Wesley’s teachings on the Spirit in at least a general way.

<sup>19</sup> Elaw could also be alluding to 1 John 5.6, but the underlying theme is similar in both verses.



ministry, the child of her body who becomes part of the body of Christ. Fueled by the Holy Spirit, the Pauline machinery Elaw sets in motion when referencing the “spirit of adoption” propels her through her own conversion, sanctification, commission, and ministry, while holding out the promise of adoption for all—her daughter, her readers, and the entire body of Christ.

### **“One Body and Spirit”: Elaw’s Vision for the Church**

Through the story of her daughter’s conversion, Elaw reveals the radical promise of “adoption” theology. Like all Christians, her daughter is a beneficiary of the covenant between God and Abraham’s descendents outlined in Genesis, amended in the law given through Moses, and fulfilled in the gospels through Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> The Holy Spirit bears witness to this covenant, freeing believers from the bondage of sin and proclaiming the full potential of what it means to be children of God: “And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8.17a). The larger argument of Romans is instructive, here. Paul contends that life in the Spirit is made possible because of the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ through his death on the cross: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8.2). Romans 5 explains that sin became part of the human condition through “Adam’s transgression” (i.e., the Fall), which would lead to death and separation from God (who is holy and cannot tolerate sin) were it not for the “free gift” of grace making eternal life possible

---

<sup>20</sup> Elaw is cognizant of each of these stages of the covenant. She describes “one of the seals to [her] ministry” as “a descendent of Abraham, according to the flesh—a Jew outwardly, who, believing in the Lord with the heart unto righteousness, became a Jew inwardly also” (155). For the biblical basis for this statement, see Romans 4, 9.4-5, and 11.15.

through the atonement of Christ's blood: “ (Rom. 5.9, 14-15, 21).<sup>21</sup> The “divine love” Elaw speaks of that allows her to joyously experience the “spirit of adoption” is part of Paul's logic in Romans 5: “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Elaw 60; Rom. 5.8).

As we have seen, one of the proofs Elaw offers as evidence of the hierarchy-overturning power of God's love is that the Holy Spirit calls both men and women to prophesy and preach (124). Another proof she assembles challenges racial prejudice:

The Almighty accounts not the black races of man either in the order of nature or spiritual capacity as inferior to the white; for He bestows his Holy Spirit on, and dwells in them as readily as in persons of whiter complexion: the Ethiopian eunuch was adopted as a son and heir of God; and when Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto him...their submission and worship will be graciously accepted. (85)

In this passage, Elaw brings together three biblical references in short succession: Acts 8.26-39 (the story of the Ethiopian eunuch who heard the good news about Jesus from the apostle Philip, was baptized by him, and “went on his way rejoicing”); Romans 8.15-17 (discussed above; “adoption” and “heirs” are the key terms); and Psalms 68.31 (“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”; this verse was used countless times during the nineteenth century to support abolition and refute racist interpretations of the Bible such as the idea that blacks descended from Noah's youngest son, Ham, and through him were cursed to be slaves in Genesis 9.25 [Wilmore 119-121]). By juxtaposing these verses, Elaw turns Romans 8.15-17 into a liberatory text in the vein of Galatians 3.26-28 (“For ye are all the *children of God* by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither

---

<sup>21</sup> Paul puts the argument of Rom. 5.12-21 more succinctly in 1 Cor. 15.22: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus,” emphasis added), calling attention to the Holy Spirit as an equalizing force.

Elaw’s antiracist objective in the above passage is so apparent that it requires little further explanation, but it is important to note that this biblical commentary on racial prejudice is prompted by a specific situation in her text. After her husband died, Elaw supported herself and her daughter for two years by filling an institutional void in her hometown of Burlington, New Jersey: she opened a school for black children because “white people refused to admit [black students] into their seminaries” (85). As this example suggests, Elaw offers adoption theology (“the Ethiopian eunuch was adopted as a son and heir of God”) to redress both spiritual and material grievances. Her white readers should give up “the pride of white skin” because scripture mandates that they do so, and black readers should be encouraged by the example of the Ethiopian eunuch as a fellow (black) Christian and child of God (85).<sup>22</sup>

Another example where the spirit of adoption suggests practical applications for Elaw can be found in the portion of her text that addresses her preaching tour in the South. At one point, having just sat down after preaching to a congregation of slaves, Elaw says she was overcome with dread: “Satan suggested to me with such force, that the slave-holders would speedily capture me, as filled me with fear and terror” (91). Elaw’s fears were well-founded; as a free black woman traveling through slave states, she could easily have been kidnapped into slavery. However, knowing that God called her to the mission at hand, Elaw is able to rally and ask herself, ““from whence cometh all this fear?”” Rhetorically, this question enables Elaw-the-narrator to show the reader how to

---

<sup>22</sup> The Ethiopian eunuch is a figure Elaw cites multiple times in her *Memoirs*. For an interesting reading of the Ethiopian eunuch as part of Elaw’s discourse of “lack,” see Douglass-Chin (53-55).

cope with practical fears through spiritual strength, explaining, “my confidence in the Lord returned, and I said, ‘get thee behind me Satan, for my Jesus hath made me free’” (91). Using the Pauline framework of “adoption” that Elaw upholds at other moments in her *Memoirs*, we can look at this forceful declaration of freedom as an extension of the “spirit of adoption” mentioned in the epigraph of this chapter: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption” (Romans 8.14-15a, NRSV). Again looking at the trajectory of Paul’s argument in Romans, the spirit of adoption drives away fear and takes the place of sin through sanctification (Rom. 6.19, 22, NRSV). For Elaw, sanctification, or holiness, is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the child of God that enables her to do amazing things (like preach in dangerous places in dangerous times).

Throughout her *Memoirs*, Elaw teaches her readers to look for the Holy Spirit everywhere, even in unlikely places, by presenting herself as an implausible medium for the Spirit, a “feeble...earthen vessel” who nevertheless enjoys spectacular ministerial success—by the grace of God, of course (92). Proofs of her ministry include “persons of every rank in life” (104), black and white, old and young, wealthy and destitute, slaves and slaveholders; some come to hear her out of sheer curiosity, wondering whether or not God’s Spirit could really be bestowed on a woman of color (141, 149). Although her appearance might have been novel to some, Elaw explains that her message was straightforward and unremarkable: “in my ministry, I determined to be conversant with no other topic...but Jesus Christ and him crucified” (113-114). However, this uncomplicated message is still a demanding one. For Elaw, faith in Jesus Christ requires believers to live out social justice and reach across spiritual divides, relinquishing

sectarian squabbles and other forms of “gospel rivalry” (109). Although she was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Society (58, 61), believed in and taught the importance of the Methodist doctrine of sanctification (68), urged all ministers to be sure they were fully “sanctified by the truth [and] purified by obeying it” before calling others to God (114), and regarded Methodist class meetings as the best method of Christian fellowship because they were most similar to meetings of the early Christian church (159), Elaw did not limit herself to the Methodist denomination or preach Methodism as the only way to Christ.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Elaw’s *Memoirs* offer a radically inclusive vision for the church.

Reflecting on a “union prayer-meeting” she once witnessed in Massachusetts where women from multiple Protestant denominations came together to “avow the rich enjoyments they had in the spirit of adoption from God,” Elaw expresses a wish directed toward the British Christian readers she first mentioned in her dedication: “O that the Christian community in Great Britain were all of one heart and one soul” (117). She grounds her desire in additional biblical language: “The Christian church should manifest one fold and one shepherd; one body and spirit; one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; and one God and father of all who is above all, and through all, and in all” (Elaw 117; see John 10.16 and Eph. 4.4-6). These verses may remind the reader of Elaw’s description of her own baptism earlier in her text, where she references 1 Corinthians 12.13: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one

---

<sup>23</sup> Elaw did not preach under the auspices of any one denomination or on particular circuits. As she explains, God alone directed her path (“the privilege of self-direction the Lord did not permit so ignorant and incompetent a servant as I was, to exercise,” 102) and provided for her monetary needs (134). For more on early-nineteenth-century sects who tried to emulate the early Christian church, see Brekus (155).

Spirit.” Taking this verse together with the other biblical citations Elaw provides in the course of her commentary on the union prayer meeting, her vision for the church is unmistakable (although the metaphors begin to pile up). The “spirit of adoption” brings all Christians together as members of God’s family; that is, members of “one body” (the church) guided by “one shepherd” (Christ).

Elaw carries her vision for the unity of the church to the very end of her *Memoirs*, “believing that there is but one church of Jesus Christ in this wilderness” (159). In fact, her penultimate paragraph reads like another Pauline epistle, encouraging Christian readers “of every name and denomination” to keep the faith and prepare for Christ’s return, “being the children of the resurrection, the sons of God,” heirs to the “everlasting kingdom” (159). By giving her final paragraphs the same Pauline feel as her dedication, Elaw subtly alerts her readers to the fact that her message and mission have been consistent throughout the book. She “commend[s] this little volume” to her Christian readers, hoping that the story of her life and ministry will build them up. Elaw seems to imagine her book as a final act of ministry, saying, “these humble memoirs will doubtless continue to be read long after I shall have ceased from my earthly labours and existence,” (160). Although we have no knowledge of her whereabouts after this text was published in 1846, it is powerful to think about Elaw continuing to gather “spiritual children” into the “gospel net” through her narrative, whether during her lifetime or after her death (141). By testifying to the power of the “spirit of adoption” in her own life and ministry, Elaw showed others how to enjoy the Spirit, too, becoming children of God.

## **Conclusion**

As with all the authors in this study, Zilpha Elaw delivers a broader message of holiness by holding up her own life in textual form as an imitable pattern where the reader can be converted just as she was converted, through the sufficiency of God.<sup>24</sup> Like Julia A. J. Foote, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Frances E. W. Harper, Elaw also capably takes a specific principle from a particular religious framework—in this case, sanctification—and demonstrates its wider applications, textually, personally, and socially, through the narration of her life and directives to her readers.

Elaw sets up one of the most powerful, explicit declarations to her readers in her *Memoirs* by first narrating a specific spiritual struggle from her own life as a cautionary tale. During the months after she obtained sanctification and began her family ministry, Elaw felt as though nothing stood between her and the divine (67). But she explains that Satan began to convince her not to proclaim her sanctified status to others with certainty, “lest [she] should be unable at all times to maintain it” (67-68). Although Elaw apparently emerged unscathed from this struggle with evil, the doubts that clouded her mind threatened her experiential assurance of sanctification. Presenting herself as wiser because of this incident, Elaw declares: “I write this as a warning to others who may be attacked with the same temptation, that they may be careful not thus to grieve the Holy Spirit of God: but ever remember, that we are witnesses of that gracious passage of Scripture, ‘This is the will of God, even your sanctification’ [1 Thess. 4:3]” (68). Elaw follows this quotation with three more verses (John 17.17, 1 Peter 1.15 and 1.22), assembling biblical evidence for sanctification and thereby defending “this blessed

---

<sup>24</sup> Using Augustine’s *Confessions* as archetype, Geoffrey Galt Harpham explains: “Augustine is converted not when he simply reads the Pauline text...but when he understands that it is a model for himself... His ambition for his own text is that it takes its place in the chain of imitable texts, speaking to others as he had been spoken to. He hopes that his text will shatter his readers’ self-sufficiency as his had been shattered” (45). As Elaw’s epigraph suggests (2 Cor. 3.5), she had a similar hope for her *Memoirs* (49).

doctrine...beloved by us Methodists,” concluding, “it is both our high privilege and bounden duty to manifest it to those around us” (68).

Though advocating a purportedly Methodist doctrine, Elaw makes her position relevant to Christians at large through systematic theology, pointing to a cluster of Bible verses that establish a pattern on the meaning and function of sanctification. This example shows that, as with the other autotheographical texts examined in this dissertation, Elaw’s *Memoirs* bridge religion and spirituality using theology. That is, Elaw juxtaposes the organized, institutional, denominational, and/or doctrinal (“religion”) with the intimate, inspirational, more personal experience of the divine (“spirituality”) in order to make interpretive moves (“theology”). These rhetorical gestures—such as commenting on scripture, good and evil, and social responsibility—are meant to change the reader’s ways of reading “the life” (both the narrator’s life and the reader’s own) and “the text” (both the autotheography and the Bible).

Understanding *autotheography* as a flexible discursive process in this way has important ramifications for scholarship on black women’s intellectual history. Elaw, Jackson, Foote, and Harper were interacting with diverse audiences and participating in important theological debates about the nature of the divine, the viability of holiness, the relative importance of denominational and sectarian distinctions, and the ways in which Christians should interact with the wider world, while also engaging numerous political and cultural debates on morality, education, temperance, abolition, racial progress, and appropriate roles for women and men in public life, among other issues.

As this study suggests, adopting a critical perspective that gives full credence to religion as an analytical category alongside other important categories like gender and



race is really an intersectional approach.<sup>25</sup> Once we recognize black women's lived experiences and self-constructions in textual forms as being shaped by and through religion *as well as* and *simultaneously* through race, gender, sexuality, class, and so on, it is impossible to go back to epistemologies that do not account for theology; we would miss the context and content of some of the most significant contributions of black women to nineteenth-century American letters. We might also find ourselves back in the "resistance" paradigm, viewing religion simplistically as a means of individual empowerment rather than a complex autotheographical process, an intricate intellectual and spiritual enterprise involving the author, the divine, and the reader.

There is yet much work to be done in order to answer the following question: why were so many freeborn, Northern black women embracing and advocating various holiness doctrines during the nineteenth century? Further examinations of religious discourse and analyses of the ways in which holiness was deployed by individuals with varying levels of social, political, and economic power are needed (for instance, contrasting black women's textual deployment of holiness with that of black men and/or white men and women). Comparative studies exploring other theological trends in nineteenth-century American literature are also needed. I offer this dissertation as a hopeful first step toward a deeper analysis of religion and theology in black women's self-constitutive spiritual texts.

---

<sup>25</sup> Intersectional analyses stem from black feminist scholarship and activism. The following reflection on black feminism offered by Barbara Ransby could also serve as a definition of intersectionality: "But what are the ideological tenets around which black feminists have organized? Perhaps strongest is the notion that race, class, gender, and sexuality are codependent variables that cannot readily be separated and ranked in scholarship, in political practice, or in lived experience" (1218). For more on the nuances of intersectionality, see Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational essay, "Mapping the Margins." For more on gender and race as categories of analysis, see Patricia Hill Collins, "Toward a New Vision."

## Works Cited

- Brekus, Catherine A. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998. Print.
- Bruss, Elizabeth W. *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye. *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection." *Race, Sex & Class* 1.1 (1993): 25-45. Print.
- Coogan, Michael D., et al, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. Ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas. New York: New, 1995. 357-383. Print.
- Douglass-Chin, Richard J. *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001. Print.
- Elaw, Zilpha. *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]*. 1846. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 49-160. Print.
- Foote, Julia A. J. *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*. 1879. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 161-234. Print.
- Foster, Frances Smith. *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- Fredriksen, Paula. *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. Print.

- Frey, Sylvia R., and Betty Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998. Print.
- Grammer, Elizabeth Elkin. *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Hardesty, Nancy A. *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*. 1984. 2nd ed. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1999. Print.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "Conversion and the Language of Autobiography." *Studies in Autobiography*. Ed. James Olney. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 42-50. Print.
- Hempton, David. *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2005. Print.
- The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1972. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact." *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. Print.
- Leland, John. "O When Shall I See Jesus." *NetHymnal*. NetHymnal 11 Aug. 2007. Web. 8 July 2010.
- Moody, Joycelyn. *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001. Print.
- Palmer, Phoebe. "Lay Your All upon the Altar." *In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writing*. Ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether. San Francisco: Harper, 1995. 230-231. Print.
- Pierce, Yolanda. *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2005. Print.
- "Praise God for What He's Done for Me." *NetHymnal*. NetHymnal 11 Aug. 2007. Web. 2 July 2010.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford UP, 1978. Print.
- Ransby, Barbara. "Black Feminism at Twenty-One: Reflections on the Evolution of a National Community." *Signs* 25.4 (2000): 1215-1221. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Aug. 2010.
- Raser, Harold E. *Phoebe Palmer, Her Life and Thought*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987. Print.

Stanley, Susie C. *Holy Boldness: Women Preachers' Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2002. Print.

“Speckle.” *An American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster; Thoroughly Revised and Greatly Enlarged and Improved, by Chauncey A. Goodrich and Noah Porter*. 1877. Print.

“Speckled Bird.” *An American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster; Thoroughly Revised and Greatly Enlarged and Improved, by Chauncey A. Goodrich and Noah Porter*. 1877. Print.

Tyson, John R., ed. Introduction. *Charles Wesley: A Reader*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. Print.

Wesley, Charles. “Sinners, Obey the Gospel Word”/“Come, O Ye Sinners, to the Lord.” *Hymnal of the Methodist Episcopal Church, With Tunes*. Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe; New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1878. Hymns 350-351. Print.

Wesley, John. “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption.” *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1 (Sermons I, 1-33). Ed. Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1984. 248-266. Print.

Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of the Afro-American People*. 2nd ed. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983. Print.