

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Jarena Lee (1783-1849?)

The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady

The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel, was first printed in Philadelphia in 1836, Lee paying thirty-eight dollars for a thousand copies which she could distribute at camp meetings and other places where she preached. A second edition, published in 1849, added her record of these places, with the scriptural texts she preached from, miles travelled, and number of converts. But otherwise very little is known of her. She was one of hundreds of itinerant preachers and “exhorters” who roamed the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. They held revivals, established new congregations and also helped to establish social order on the frontier and in urban areas unrepresented by other churches.

One of these churches was the African Methodist Episcopal church, which had been founded by Richard Allen, the man who converted Lee in 1804. Allen was also glad to accept her as someone who could hold prayer meetings and “exhort,” that is, encourage congregations to heed the sermons and the scriptures; but like other clergymen of the time, he resisted accepting women preachers.

Lee’s autobiography, therefore, is both a spiritual autobiography, with powerful accounts of her visions and her promptings to speak and pray, and also an account of her progress in attaining greater social autonomy, until she becomes one of the first non-Quaker woman preachers in America. Indeed, the two stories come together at many points. The visions call her out of a life of submissiveness, and once they are answered and described, they give her power. Religion liberates her from a life of sin (and the status of a “servant maid”). Religion provides her with a way of supporting herself after her minister-husband dies and of having a very active, eventful life. In 1827, for example, she gave 178 sermons, travelling 2325 miles. The religious autobiography allows her to repeat this story—and make her plea for women preachers.

The text is from *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986). For discussion of Lee in the context of other black autobiographers, see Andrews’s *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986).

Reading

Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee
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