

Preaching and Writing Bible Scripts
A Response to Anna Carter Florence's "'A Holy Joy of a Peculiar Kind:' Jarena Lee's Call to Preach the Gospel—and Open Our Minds"

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Abstract: *This paper responds to and extends the portrayal of Jarena Lee (1783-185?) as an interpreter of biblical scripts, advanced by Anna Carter Florence's essay. She reexamines the significance of Lee's autobiography as the first woman licensed to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, casting her as a Black contemplative preacher. Noting Lee's hermeneutical tendency to resource the Bible for its narrative scripts, Florence Carter states that Lee was a preacher who "found her script in the scripture." With gratitude to Carter Florence's proposal, this response reviews her perspective and explores extending Lee's contemplative preaching approach from biblical script preacher to include Lee as a writer.*

Introduction

I am grateful for my colleague Anna Carter Florence's consideration of Jarena Lee as a resource and figure in the Black contemplative preaching tradition. More than mere reconsideration, Carter Florence's approach enacts an intellectual form of the Akan philosophical tradition of Sankofa.¹ Born from the Adinkra cultural system, Sankofa, *Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi*, in translation means, "It is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget."² It is a way of knowing one's communities and self that relates the past to the present and future. Sankofa is a memory, ritual, and naming practice that retrieves ancestors and their stories and invites them into the present moment. According to one scholar, Sankofa is also a solution "to reconstituting a fragmented cultural past."³ Focusing on the nineteenth-century African American woman preacher and writer Jarena Lee (1783-185?), Carter Florence retrieves and reaches into the archive of Black women's religious history and writing. Eschewing mere historical reconstruction, she contemporizes Lee for women preachers and teachers who value the powers of agency, voice, and witness.

Carter Florence's paper "fetches" Jarena Lee's "Holy Joy of a Peculiar Kind" to respond to a contemporary question: "How does a woman open her mind to what she can and can't be?" In the question, there is a generative "talk back" of response and affirmation that is akin to what Thurman prescribes in his meditation, "We are Visited:"

¹ I am grateful to one of my first conversation partners in the field of homiletics, Melva Sampson, who introduced the notion of Sankofa to me years ago. Since then, it has become a component of my hermeneutical approach. See Melva Sampson, "Fetching Spiritual Power: Black Women's Preaching Bodies as African-Centered Womanist Oratory" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2016); Shively T. J. Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women's Moral Writings* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 10–15, 87–88, 145.

² Quoted in Christel N. Temple, "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History," *Journal of African American Studies*, 41, no. 1 (2010): 127; W. Bruce Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra* (Washington, DC: Pyramid Complex, 1998), 188–89.

³ Quoted in Pamela Felder Small, Marco J. Barker, and Marybeth Gasman, eds., *Sankofa: African American Perspectives on Race and Culture in US Doctoral Education* (New York: SUNY Press, 2020), 10; Temple, "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States," 128.

It is our great and blessed fortune that our lives are never left to themselves alone. We are visited in ways that we can understand and in ways that are beyond our understanding, by highlights, great moments of inspiration. ... We are also surrounded by the witness of those others whose strivings have made possible so much upon which we draw from the common reservoir of our heritage, those who have carried the light against the darkness, those who have persevered when to persevere seemed idiotic and suicidal, those who have forgotten themselves in the full and creative response to something that calls them beyond the furthest reaches of their dreams and their hopes.⁴

Thurman understands the process of memory and retrieval as fertile soil for spiritual and ancestral visitation. Such encounters, or “religious experience” in Thurman’s terminology, unfold as movements back, from here to there; and movements forward, from there to here. According to Thurman, the visitation and invitational nature of the contemplative encounter involves entanglements of the individual life with the lives of others. He says, “The religious experience as I [Howard Thurman] have known it seems to swing wide the door, not merely into Life but into lives.”⁵

Strikingly, the very structure of Carter Florence’s paper performs Thurman’s contemplative proposition that bi-directional visitations are possible and necessary for the Christian religious experience. Her mixed study approach combines a re-contextualized examination of Jarena Lee’s significance and life with her testimony. The rhetorical frame and movement of the paper embody a contemplative mode of exploration and witness, which leads me to consider two questions. First, what interpretation practices can we form in response to autobiographical exchange following Lee’s model? Second, how do we “talk back” to ourselves and our communities through the autobiographical stories shared between us and the witness of forbearers from the black contemplative tradition?

Jarena Lee: A Creative Producer of Bible Scripts

Pregnant with deeper interpretive reflection, Carter Florence classifies Lee’s call story as a Bible script. Lee claims Jonah’s story for herself in retelling her call story. Sitting in a church listening to her male counterpart preach from Jonah 2:9 when, according to church polity, she cannot; Lee felt moved to talk back to the preacher and congregation. From her perspective, the preacher “seemed to have lost the spirit.” In response, Lee reports that she sprang to her feet “as by an altogether supernatural impulse” and “aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text” her brother-preacher had taken. This was the moment, according to Lee, when she

⁴ Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1975), 54. This language is also used as a womanist hermeneutical approach, though my understanding of its pertinence to Black contemplative preaching and interpreting traditions is slightly different. Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 3, 5, 30-31. A womanist hermeneutical approach casts “talkback” as an interpretive mode of resistance that is suspicious of power hierarchies and disparities that render meaning to people, places, cultures, and stories. Consequently, womanist talkback hermeneutics typically approach texts and contexts in a mode of interrogation, correction, and resistance. Within the Black contemplative tradition, as captured in Lee’s autobiography and Thurman’s meditation, it is a means for communing, connecting, and exchanging. Talkback can move participants closer, create a deeper understanding of each other, and build a connection where it may have been previously absent or unacknowledged.

⁵ Howard Thurman, “Excerpt from *The Luminous Darkness* (1965),” in *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, eds. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 257.

responded to her “call to preach,” identifying herself as the contemporary Jonah figure in their midst.

I told them that I was like Jonah; for it had been then nearly eight years since the Lord had called me to preach his gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam’s race, but that I had lingered like him, and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord...⁶

Lee’s interaction with Scripture was a connecting moment. It attests that contemplative preaching is a site where the preacher and congregation can become something that had not yet been realized up to that point. Carter Florence describes Lee’s call story in such terms when she says, “... when she heard the Scripture read aloud and knew herself in it, something snapped into place. *She was Jonah*... It’s the moment when she connects what is happening in her life to a story she knows in her sacred texts and places herself in that story. It’s the moment she perceives she has a script in the scripture.” Her interpretation of Lee’s preaching call experience portrays her as a “script finder.” Lee reads Scripture on the hunt for where her story is biblical, and she often legitimates her preaching vocation based on how her life script aligns with the scripts supplied in Scripture. Biblical citation in her mystical hermeneutic has a particular function, therefore. It is not just that a verse or story is in the Bible and thus carries an inherent authority. What makes biblical texts authoritative in Lee’s contemplative preaching model is the extent to which they are script-worthy in the present moment and fundamentally a script “in production.”

In addition to Jonah, Lee finds her “script in scripture” in another figure of the Hebrew Bible, Balaam. Lee not only cites the Bible when referencing Balaam, but she appears to invert the biblical narrative as she takes ownership of the story. The most popular Jewish tradition of Balaam is found in the books of Joshua and Nehemiah. They present Balaam as one who constantly accepts bribes to draw Israel into idolatry (see Deut 23:4; Josh 24:9–10; Neh 13:2). Second Peter 2:15–16 appears to pick up on this common cycle. It is not, however, the tradition of preference in the writings of early African American contemplative women like Lee and Zilpha Elaw. They prefer to use the tradition of Numbers 22 to contrast women’s intellectual speech acts against that of nonhuman creations. The Balaam story cast in Numbers 22 portrays him positively. He is a prophet who refuses to curse Israel (Num 22:22–38) after following the guidance of his donkey. It is the donkey—a nonspeaking and irrational animal—and not Balaam, who acts rationally and even prophetically in the story by verbally warning the prophet of the dangers ahead on the road (Num 22:27–30). As I have noted elsewhere, “The donkey speaks in service to preserving life. It observes and responds appropriately to God’s revelations (Num 22:31–33).”⁷ Lee’s reading of the Balaam story champions the place and voice of women within her religious communities. She employed a particular script in the Balaam tradition as material to describe the efforts and attitudes of people she encountered—be it agents of resistance or support. Biblical scripts equipped her with the material necessary to reflect on her religious experience and those of others in her community.⁸

Similarly, in another place in her autobiography, Lee likens her travel experience on a road to Balaam’s encounter with the angel.

The following day I walked fourteen miles to a meeting, where also we were greatly favored with the presence of God. Soon after this, I thought of going home to Philadelphia. I got about three miles on foot, when an apparent voice said, “If thou

⁶ Jarena Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” in *Spiritual Narratives*, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 17.

⁷ Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 169.

⁸ Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” 23.

goest home thou wilt die.” I paused for a moment, and not comprehending what it meant, pursued my journey. Again I was startled by something like a tapping on my shoulder, but, on turning round, I found myself alone, which two circumstances created a singular feeling I could not understand. I thought of Balaam when met by the angel in the way. I was taken sick and it seemed I should die in the road. I said I will go back, and walked about four miles to Bridgeport.⁹

Paul’s Damascus Road experience is a popular biblical script in nineteenth-century African American interpretive writings.¹⁰ Here, Lee departs from that tradition by using the story of divine intervention and encounter narrated in the Balaam account as biblical precedence for her religious experience. She was going one way, and intuition warned her against continuing. Lee, in response, reversed course on the road. The Balaam story supplies her with proofs from biblical wisdom discourses (Sirach 22:22) about the reversals that occur in ministerial intentions.¹¹ She uses biblical citation to make sense of her “changing course” act and articulates how it aligns with biblical precedence. In this way, her story becomes an extension and even re-enactment of the Balaam story. Again, she is not merely a scriptwriter; her spiritual autobiography is the biblical script in production, just as Carter Florence’s essay encourages us to consider.

The Bible She Cites, but the Poetry She Quotes

Mapping Lee’s use of the Bible in her autobiography, informed by Carter Florence’s insight, leads to another consideration. Lee’s autobiography not only captures her call story to preach and its unfolding travels, it also records her call to write. Script-finding as a mode of mystical hermeneutics gives way to script writing in Lee’s life story. She moves from reading biblical scripts as sources for clarifying her preaching ministry to writing her story as an authorizing source, informed by the Bible, to explain the callings of others. Despite the lack of formal education, Lee published two autobiographies in her name during her lifetime. Opting for full disclosure, as opposed to some of her contemporaries who deployed the rhetorical strategy of pseudonymity (i.e., Ida B. Wells, Sarah Louisa Forten Purvis, etc.), Lee kept her name on everything.¹² Her name and personal story went hand in hand as a script that others needed to read to find their stories. She says:

In 1836 I travelled 556 miles, and preached 11 sermons, and felt under much exercise to print a book, and I had some friends to encourage me. . . and every circumstance was so favorable that I finally succeeded, and when they were brought home, I sat down in the house and wondered how I should dispose of them; to sell them appears too much like merchandize.¹³

For Lee, biblical scriptwriting was not intended for economics, though it did help support her itineracy at times. Instead, her mystical writing endeavor aimed to share her story as an authorizing text akin to how the Scripture functioned for her. In this way, Lee chose to participate in public discourse, which is both biblical and civil, as well as testimony and story. She “appropriated the English literary tradition to reveal, interpret, challenge, and change

⁹ Quoted in Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 154; Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” 33.

¹⁰ Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 117, 383, 385, 405.

¹¹ Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 170–171.

¹² Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 105.

¹³ Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” 77.

perceptions of” herself and the world in which she found herself.¹⁴ In some ways, her spiritual autobiography extends the biblical scripts of calling and encounter. Carter Frances’ focus on “scripture as script” provides analysis for tracing the use of biblical texts in “the preaching writers” of the Black contemplative tradition.

Ultimately, Carter Florence’s paper is a compelling invitation to revisit Lee’s autobiography and the stories of others equipped with our own stories and the stories from our communities. It is not enough to merely read Lee, Murray, Baldwin, Thurman—they must read us. Studying Black contemplative preaching requires forging approaches that reexamine these figures and the resources of African traditions, contemplation, and preaching—all of which offer and lend themselves to a two-way testimony and reading process.

¹⁴ Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 16.