

## No Half Savior: Jarena Lee's Autobiography as Prophetic Rhetoric

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*Jarena Lee was an African American woman who preached in a patriarchal religious context in the nineteenth century. This essay claims that Jarena Lee's spiritual autobiography functioned as prophetic rhetoric within her religious community. Prophetic rhetoric calls for change and anchors that call in foundations that the communicator and her audience treat as sacred. I make four contributions to the study of prophetic rhetoric. First, I demonstrate that the genre of spiritual autobiography has value as a site of prophetic rhetoric. Second, I heed Kerith Woodyard's call to decrease the white patriarchy of the canon of prophetic rhetoric. Third, I expand the field's contextual scope to consider communication that both originates in and addresses a religious community. Fourth, I consider hermeneutical dimensions of race, sex, and class in prophetic rhetoric.*

**Keywords:** *Jarena Lee, prophetic rhetoric, spiritual autobiography, preaching*

The tradition of prophetic rhetoric stretches back to ancient Hebrew literature, and James Darsey's *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* provides a fresh foundation for the study of prophetic rhetoric in the United States of America.<sup>1</sup> Darsey's book focuses on white men, and more recent scholarly literature further expands our understanding of prophetic rhetoric. For example, Kerith Woodyard urges the tradition to consider women who communicate prophetically, while Andre Johnson and Christopher Hobson explore speeches and writings by African American men.<sup>2</sup> This essay combines those expansions to investigate prophetic rhetoric in a text by Jarena Lee, an African American woman.

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<sup>1</sup> James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Kerith M. Woodyard, "Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Feminist Prophetic Tradition," *Ohio Communication Journal* 48 (2010): 27-42; Christopher Z. Hobson, *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950* (New York: Oxford, 2012); Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012); Andre E. Johnson, "'To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable': W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American Prophetic Tradition," *Carolinas Communication Annual* 32 (2016): 16-29.

“One of the first African American women known to have preached the gospel in the thirteen colonies,” Jarena Lee “is regarded as the first woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.”<sup>3</sup> She was born on February 11, 1783, in Cape May, New Jersey. Her parents were poor, and her maiden name is unknown.<sup>4</sup> She worked as a domestic servant for over a decade, in which she learned to read and write.<sup>5</sup> Following spiritual experiences in which she received her call to preach, she informed her bishop, AME founder Richard Allen, of her calling, which he resisted. Years later, when Allen finally heard Lee preach, he affirmed her calling but did not ordain her to the ministry of preaching. Instead, he limited her to speaking outside the main meetings of the religious establishment. Despite this marginalization, Lee’s preaching ministry included countless miles, chronic illness, ecstatic results, and danger as she spoke in slave states. Her journal, in which she argued for her right to preach, first appeared in 1836, was printed again in 1839, and was widely distributed.<sup>6</sup>

This essay claims that Jarena Lee’s spiritual autobiography, especially the section in which she explained her right to preach, functioned as prophetic rhetoric within her religious community. Prophetic rhetoric calls for change and anchors that call in foundations that the communicator and her audience treat as sacred (i.e. deeply treasured). The “sacred” may or may not be overtly religious, but for Lee it was.<sup>7</sup> She grounded her narrative and arguments in the Bible, theology, church tradition, and spiritual experiences. That engagement with religious foundations distinguishes the autobiography as a spiritual one.

In noting Lee’s autobiography’s prophetic elements, I make four contributions to the field. First, I demonstrate that the genre of spiritual autobiography has value as a site of prophetic rhetoric. Second, I heed Woodyard’s call to decrease the white patriarchy of the canon of prophetic rhetoric. Third, I expand the field’s contextual scope. Recent scholars of prophetic rhetoric have focused on communication from a religious community to a larger society, and I consider communication that both originates in and addresses a religious community. Fourth, I consider hermeneutical dimensions of prophetic rhetoric at an intersection of race, sex, and class. In making those contributions, I offer three sections in this essay’s body. The first section briefly explains spiritual autobiography, describes Jarena Lee’s spiritual autobiography, and begins to shift into analysis. The second introduces a theoretical foundation for the study of prophetic

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2010), 160; Susan J. Hubert, “Testimony and Prophecy in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 54/55:2/1 (1998): 45.

<sup>4</sup> Much of the biographical information is from Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 160-163.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Billington, “‘Female Laborers in the Church’: Women Preachers in the Northeastern United States, 1790-1840,” *Journal of American Studies* 19 (1985): 374.

<sup>6</sup> Hubert, “Testimony and Prophecy,” 45.

<sup>7</sup> Darsey mentions both religious and secular foundations (“Old Testament prophecy and the received notion of American virtue”) in his *The Prophetic Tradition*, xi. In Evans’ discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois, “the American ideal that informs democracy” serves as the sacred foundation. C.f. Joseph N. Evans, “Double-Consciousness: The Du Boisian Hermeneutic,” *Homiletic* 36:2 (2011): 3.

rhetoric and analyzes Lee's words through that lens. The third explores the influences of race, sex, and class on Lee's interpretation of ancient texts deemed sacred by her community.

### Spiritual Autobiography

In her article "Testimony and Prophecy in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*," Susan Hubert uses previous writings by and about Jarena Lee to study the life of this nineteenth-century preacher.<sup>8</sup> Hubert contributes to the field of knowledge about Lee and spiritual autobiography, especially in African American experience, in at least two important ways. First, Hubert calls for historical context to be the primary interpretive key of Lee's spiritual autobiography; literary form is secondary. Second, Hubert notes the communal nature of Lee's testimony and anchors that communality in the historic connection of individual and community in African traditions that influence African American Christianity. The second observation complements a statement by Roderick Hart and Suzanne Daughton: "A message is worth analyzing if it tells a story larger than itself. . . . Concern for the larger story, therefore, should animate each piece of rhetorical criticism."<sup>9</sup> To a large extent, with any message, the community is the story, whether that community is hidden, resisted, or embraced.

Instead of comparing "Lee's autobiography to other spiritual autobiographies . . . therefore giving privilege to literary form over cultural context," Hubert holds that "the African-American church context, rather than other autobiographical texts, is the essential interpretive key to Lee's autobiography." Hubert further claims that "*The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* is not simply a spiritual autobiography; it is both testimony and prophecy, and speaks from and to a particular faith community."<sup>10</sup> This observation helpfully contributes to the interpretation of Lee's narrative; but testifying, prophesying, and speaking "from and to a particular faith community" are common functions of spiritual autobiographies (i.e. autobiographies that use religious language and tell about religious experiences).<sup>11</sup> Hubert, however, writes that "it might be more appropriate to describe Lee's book as a testimony rather than a spiritual autobiography."

Importantly, Hubert does not provide a clear distinction between testimony and spiritual autobiography, even as she understands the distinction to have great impact on the reading of Lee's story. By treating it as a testimony, Hubert brings to bear on the interpretation the historical context and collectivistic culture in which Lee preached and wrote. Both are crucial to understanding Lee's narrative. Her words do not speak in a vacuum; they carry power to influence because they are rooted in a prophetic yet patriarchal religious culture. Her words also exert persuasive force because they are

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<sup>8</sup> Hubert, "Testimony and Prophecy," 45-52.

<sup>9</sup> Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2005), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Hubert, "Testimony and Prophecy," 45.

<sup>11</sup> Examples include the following: Leroy Garrett, *A Lover's Quarrel: An Autobiography: My Pilgrimage of Freedom in Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2003); Sally Gary, *Loves God Likes Girls: A Memoir* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2013). My parenthetical definition of spiritual autobiographies uses the term "religious," but I do not intend to exclude writings by people who might claim to be "spiritual but not religious."

written not simply by an individual but by an individual intimately connected as a member of a community of faith. Another observation, which Hubert might have in mind but does not overtly state, is that knowledge of Lee's historical and cultural contexts allows readers to understand her appeals to theology, scripture, and pragmatic results as methods of identification with her audience. Before detailing those appeals, this essay overviews experiences reported in Lee's autobiography.<sup>12</sup> That overview sets the stage for an analysis of her arguments.

Lee had spiritual experiences in which she received her call to preach. First, she endured a shocking silence in which she heard, "Go preach the Gospel!" She objected not by saying that she was unworthy, incapable, or unwilling, but by voicing her fear that "No one will believe me." Her fear was more about her reception as a speaker than it was about the content of her message. She lived in a patriarchal religious culture that had no place for female preachers. Although women had preached in Christianity since its beginning, Lee apparently had not learned about that legacy.<sup>13</sup> The AME Church, a religious community initiated to provide African Americans a worship environment outside the restrictions of white assumptions and practices, continued a system of sexual inequality received from their people's enslavers. Shirley Carlson writes about African American women in the later years of the nineteenth century:

The black community's appreciation for and development of the feminine intellect contrasted sharply with the views of the larger society. In the latter, intelligence was regarded as a masculine quality which would "defeminize" women. The ideal white woman, being married, confined herself almost exclusively to the private domain of the household. She was demur, perhaps even self-effacing. She often deferred to her husband's presumably superior judgment, rather than formulating her own views and vocally expressing them, as black women often did. A woman in the larger society might skillfully manipulate her husband for her own purposes, but she was not supposed to confront or challenge him directly. Black women were often direct, and frequently won community approval for this quality, especially when such a characteristic was directed toward achieving "racial up lift." Further, even after her marriage, a black woman might remain in the public domain, possibly in paid employment. The ideal black woman's domain, then, was both the private and the public spheres. She was wife

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<sup>12</sup> This paper does not attempt to judge the reality of anyone's spiritual experiences. The information about Lee's spiritual experiences comes from her autobiography, *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* (Philadelphia: Printed and published for the author, 1836). This paper uses the reprinting of a portion of the autobiography in Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 163-166.

<sup>13</sup> For historical accounts of women preachers in early Christianity, consult the following: Elaine J. Lawless, "Introduction: The Issue of Blood--Reinstating Women into the Tradition," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2; Karen L. King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority: The Case of the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene)," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 21-23.

and mother, but she could also assume other roles, such as schoolteacher, social activist, businesswoman, among others. And she was intelligent.<sup>14</sup>

That situation may have been the case in the late nineteenth century but apparently was quite different from Lee's experience. When she heard the commission to preach, she was trapped in and formed by a religious system that privileged male voices. The silencing of women apparently was not an issue that she was interested to counter prior to this spiritual experience. Because of that, she assumed the speaker to be Satan. With that fear, she pursued confirmation of the call and had another spiritual experience, a vision of a pulpit with a Bible on it. Thereafter, she preached in her sleep loudly enough to wake up the other inhabitants of the house and even herself.

When she informed her bishop, AME founder Richard Allen, of her calling, he responded that the church's "Discipline knew nothing at all about . . . women preachers." She described this experience as a quenching of a fire, albeit a temporary quenching that would not permanently extinguish the flame.<sup>15</sup> "Discipline" refers to bylaws, and Allen referenced the discipline of the larger Methodist denomination. Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas write, "Allen's serious obedience to the white Discipline was indeed strange, since he had been breaking ties with the white Methodists since 1787. Was Reverend Allen really being faithful to the Discipline, or was he using it to disguise a culture-bound bias against women preachers?"<sup>16</sup> According to Simmons and Thomas, the second option is likely correct.<sup>17</sup> This makes sense in light of the above reported patriarchy of the nineteenth-century United States, a patriarchy that was "operative in the African-American church."<sup>18</sup> Deborah Gray White observes that African American women and men in nineteenth-century slavery on plantations in the South had different but complementary roles and experienced mutual respect, but white patriarchy crafted the African American Christianity that Jarena Lee experienced.<sup>19</sup> Years later, when Allen heard Lee preach, he affirmed her calling but did not ordain her to the ministry of preaching. Instead, he marginalized her to speaking outside the main meetings of the religious establishment.

After recounting Allen's initial response, Lee warned, "O how careful ought we be, lest through our bylaws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life."<sup>20</sup> She anchored her claim in the words of Jesus: "nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). Lee apparently assumed that the biblical rationale for preaching by men and not by women arose from the theological conviction that men were permitted to preach because "the Saviour" (Jesus) died for men. Although Lee did not indicate that arguments from Pauline texts in the New Testament were used by her

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<sup>14</sup> Shirley J. Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," *The Journal of Negro History* 77 (1992): 62.

<sup>15</sup> In telling this part of her story, Lee uses language from the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, as noted by Hubert, "Testimony and Prophecy," 49.

<sup>16</sup> Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Hubert, "Testimony and Prophecy," 48.

<sup>19</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), 22.

<sup>20</sup> Lee in Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 164.

specific religious community, those arguments were common in the larger context of Christianity in the nineteenth-century United States.<sup>21</sup> She challenged the conviction through a series of three consecutive questions. First, “And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach, seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as the man?” Second, “If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for her also?” Third, “Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one, as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear?”<sup>22</sup>

After issuing the warning, challenge, and questions, Lee presented a series of arguments. First, she drew from the biblical account that Mary “*first* preach[ed] the risen Saviour” (John 20:18).<sup>23</sup> That part of the Fourth Gospel portrays Mary Magdalene telling other disciples of Jesus that she saw him. Although this small group communication does not fit the stereotype of preaching as a form of public address, a broader understanding of preaching appears later in Lee’s autobiography.

Second, she appealed to theology. Specifically, she referenced the doctrine of the resurrection voiced by Mary in John 20 and developed initially by the Apostle Paul. Lee did not cite a specific Pauline text, but she may have thought of First Corinthians 15.

Third, Lee dealt with history. As if knowledgeable of forms of preaching in the early church as well as in the nineteenth century, she mentioned the possibility that preaching might have happened differently in the first century than in her own. She stated a view that some in her religious community may have held: “that Mary did not expound the Scripture, therefore she did not preach, in the proper sense of the term.” Lee presented an insightful response: “it may be that the term *preach*, in those primitive times, did not mean exactly what it is now *made* to mean; perhaps it was a great deal more simple then, than it is now; if it were not, the unlearned fishermen could not have preached the Gospel at all, as they had no learning.”<sup>24</sup> In making her argument, Lee exemplified a common tendency among nineteenth-century female preachers to resist education-based hierarchical distinctions between Christians.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cyrus Cort, “Woman Preaching Viewed in the Light of God’s Word and Church History,” *The Reformed Quarterly Review* 29 (1882): 124-126. For a nineteenth-century response to the use of those biblical texts to argue against preaching by women, see Luther Lee, “Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel,” pages 92-95 in *Five Sermons and a Tract by Luther Lee*, edited by Donald W. Dayton (Chicago: Holrad, 1975). The sermons by Cyrus Cort and Luther Lee appear in Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 212-215, 225-227. See also Billington, 378. The New Testament texts most mentioned in discussions of women’s preaching, especially in arguments against women’s preaching, are First Corinthians 14:34-35 and First Timothy 2:11-12.

<sup>22</sup> Lee in Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 164.

<sup>23</sup> Contrary to *Preaching with Sacred Fire*’s introduction to Lee’s piece, the Mary here is Mary Magdalene, also known as Mary of Magdala, not the mother of Jesus.

<sup>24</sup> Lee in Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 164. Research supports Lee’s suspicion about the diversity of preaching forms. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 1: The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9-16; King, “Prophetic Power and Women’s Authority,” 23.

<sup>25</sup> Billington, “Female Laborers in the Church,” 369-394.

Fourth, Lee presented her call to preach as a gift and anchored it in the biblical metaphor of a vineyard.

If then, to preach the Gospel, by the gift of heaven, comes by inspiration solely, is God straitened; must he take the man exclusively? May he not, did he not, and can he not inspire a female to preach the simple story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, and accompany it too, with power to the sinner's heart. As for me, I am fully persuaded that the Lord called me to labour according to what I have received, in his vineyard.<sup>26</sup>

Given Lee's already apparent reliance on Pauline theology, her "gift" language likely arose from First Corinthians 12.

Fifth, Lee mentioned her success in preaching. People previously disinterested in religious matters had responded to her sermons.

As for me, I am fully persuaded that the Lord called me to labour according to what I have received, in his vineyard. If he has not, how could he consistently bear testimony in favour of my poor labours, in awakening and converting sinners? . . . I have frequently found families who told me that they had not for several years been to a meeting, and yet, while listening to hear what God would say by his poor colored female instrument, have believed with trembling, tears rolling down their cheeks—the signs of contrition and repentance towards God.<sup>27</sup>

After appealing to the Bible, theology, and history, she mentioned her results as evidence of her calling.

Despite her skepticism regarding her calling to preach, despite marginalization by her religious establishment, and despite her doubt regarding her ability to endure, Lee persevered with hope. She ended her autobiographical account of her calling with a moving reference to God's love and power to keep her "from falling" (Romans 8:38-39; Jude 1:24). Within her religious community, this God appeal strengthened the previous arguments' legitimacy.

The genius of Lee's rhetoric is its use of the Bible, theology, history, and pragmatism. Of course, many Christians in the nineteenth-century United States wanted arguments to be anchored in scripture, theology, and tradition. To this blend, Lee added her success as a preacher. In a culture that valued pragmatic results, her account appealed not only to typical Christian authorities but also to a virtue valued beyond her religious community. This combination of appeals fueled her prophetic call for change.

### **Spiritual Autobiography as Prophetic Rhetoric**

Andre Johnson defines prophetic rhetoric as "discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while

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<sup>26</sup> Lee in Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 165.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

offering celebration and hope for a brighter future.”<sup>28</sup> Prophetic rhetoric occurs in a four-part structure. First is a grounding of “prophetic discourse in what the speaker[s] and the audience[s] deem as sacred.”<sup>29</sup> This grounding occurs in community, a required element of prophetic rhetoric. “People who adopt prophetic personas,” in other words, “cannot do so as rugged individuals, but must root their ‘prophecy’ within communal traditions, beliefs and expectations.”<sup>30</sup> As a member of an African American and religious community, Jarena Lee grounded her rhetoric in “sacred” foundations—scripture, theology, tradition, and experience. The second part of the structure is “consciousness-raising through a sharing or an announcement of the real situation. . . . Thus, instead of unveiling the hidden, the prophet reveals the hidden in plain sight” to state “the obvious that others might be afraid to speak.”<sup>31</sup> In this consciousness-raising, a prophetic communicator wants the audience to reflect on the revealed “situation with the hope of changing its ways.”<sup>32</sup> Lee may or may not have expected her community to change, but she boldly addressed her community’s obvious yet overlooked sexism. The third part of the structure “is the charge, challenge, critique, judgment, or warning of the audience(s) . . . . The prophet usually does this by offering reinterpretations of what is sacred and casting a vision of the world not as it is, but as it could and should be.”<sup>33</sup> Lee reinterpreted the history and potential of women in Christianity, especially in preaching roles, and empowered her community to envision a future that included proclamation by women. Fourth “is the offer of encouragement and hope.”<sup>34</sup> Johnson notes two kinds of hope in this kind of rhetoric. The first is “an eschatological hope . . . a hope that things will get better in some afterlife or some other spiritual transformation to some other world.” The second is “a ‘pragmatic hope’ . . . a more ‘this-worldly’ and earthly type . . . that grounds itself in the prophet’s belief in the Divine to make right order in this world . . . a hope that sees a new day coming.”<sup>35</sup> Although Lee did not offer an end-of-time hope or a realistic expectation that her community would change its sexist ways, she offered an individual hope, which I will address later.

Two areas of confusion threaten to weaken the heuristic value of prophetic rhetoric as an analytical tool in rhetorical criticism. First, readers might assume that prophetic rhetoric predicts future events. Johnson’s definition of prophetic rhetoric, however, involves calling for change and neither requires nor excludes prediction. Recent studies of prophetic rhetoric arise from ancient Hebrew rhetoric, and prophetic

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 7. Because I do not present Jarena Lee’s rhetoric as an occurrence of the African American jeremiad, this paper does not incorporate some important works in the study of African American prophetic rhetoric. David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Willie J. Harrell, Jr., “A Call to Consciousness and Action: Mapping the African-American Jeremiad,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36:2 (2006): 149-180.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable,’” 19. This counters Darsey’s claim that prophetic rhetoric does not appeal to the audience’s foundational values. Consult Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable,’” 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*; Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable,’” 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20. This paragraph de-italicizes some words that Johnson italicizes.

communicators in that context sometimes predicted and sometimes did not. When they predicted, they did so to call for change. The change was the focus. Second, readers might assume that the phrase identifies the words only of someone in a specific ministerial position, as if only “prophets” speak prophetically. Christopher Hobson, however, writes that prophetic rhetoric is more than an office but is “a kind of speech or writing that occurred to its practitioners as they turned to questions that arose in community life.”<sup>36</sup> Johnson similarly focuses on prophetic personas instead of deciphering who is or is not a prophet. This essay likewise does not attempt to determine whether Jarena Lee was a prophet. Instead, using the language of Johnson’s definition to guide analysis, the following five observations reveal that Lee communicated in a prophetic manner.

First, Lee’s story is “discourse grounded in the sacred.”<sup>37</sup> Her story is more than just an autobiography; it is a testimony that speaks to people in power who have silenced her. Furthermore, it is rooted in sources esteemed by her religious community as sacred—scripture, theology, tradition, and spiritual experience.

Second, her story is “rooted in a community experience.”<sup>38</sup> As stated above, Hubert asserts that Lee’s story should not be read in isolation without consideration of her religious community. That is true of any story and is especially pertinent to one that specifically mentions parts of its community, as Lee’s did. It referenced people, texts, traditions, and experiences of her religious community. Also, her religious community was part of a larger African American community, although Lee did not highlight racial issues but instead argued for the right to preach, as a woman, within her AME context. Furthermore, her story is rooted in the “community experience” of women, who were largely marginalized and silenced in the nineteenth-century United States. There is no evidence, however, that she had any intention to contribute to the developing movement toward women’s rights. Her preaching did not focus on that topic but rather stressed a basic message of Christian proselytism. Her testifying autobiography, on the other hand, directly attacked patriarchal perspectives that limited women’s participation in ministry. Although the extent to which Lee consciously rooted her rhetoric in the communal experiences of African Americans and women is limited, her narrative clearly is rooted in the AME community.

Third, Lee’s story critiqued her community and tradition. She critiqued the AME Church’s oppression of women by questioning theological assumptions of her community, including a patriarchal understanding of salvation and the resurrection. Furthermore, she highlighted hidden parts of her community’s tradition (e.g. Mary’s proclamation) that legitimized women’s participation in preaching.

Fourth, the narrative challenged “society to live up to the ideals espoused.”<sup>39</sup> Although some recent scholarship in the field of prophetic rhetoric has focused largely on discourse in public spheres beyond the ecclesial level, prophetic rhetoric “is based on the relationship between an individual and his or her community.”<sup>40</sup> The society that Lee challenged was not her nation’s general public but was the smaller society of the AME

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<sup>36</sup> Hobson, *The Mount of Vision*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Hubert, “Testimony and Prophecy,” 51.

Church. She called her religious society to “live up to” the commitment to a Savior who died for all people, the commitment to scripture that contains examples of women serving in ministries of proclamation, and the commitment to acknowledging and affirming spiritual experiences of the community’s members. In a religious community that had begun as a reaction to the marginalization of the African American experience in predominately white Christianity, Lee called for continued change in the direction of equality and empowerment.

Finally, although her “offering celebration and hope for a brighter future” may not be clear, it is present. Lee did not paint a picture of a glorious future for her repentant community, nor did she foresee a possible future in which AME women would separate from the rest of their denomination. She did not call for a decrease of patriarchy in the larger United States culture. Instead, she firmly challenged the AME community to acknowledge her right to speak and to abandon understandings and practices that demeaned women. Her arguments for the right to preach did not reach a point of celebration, but she did extend hope—an individual hope: “nothing could have separated my soul from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus . . . I have not yet doubted the power and goodness of God to keep me from falling.”<sup>41</sup> On a personal level, if not on a communal level, Lee was hopeful, not of her community’s potential to change, but in her God’s loyalty to support her and work through her. Without assuming her community would change, she nevertheless called for change.

### Beyond Double-Consciousness

Jarena Lee’s arguments interpreted ancient words (i.e. sacred foundations) to support her case, and the hermeneutical dimensions of Lee’s rhetoric were shaped by her race, sex, and class. That multidimensional shaping requires scholars to think beyond the categories in some recent literature about hermeneutics and social inequalities. Therefore, after mentioning race in biblical hermeneutics, this section returns to Woodyard’s contribution to consider sex’s influence and then considers, in light of an article by Koala Jones-Warsaw, that race, sex, and class combined in Lee’s prophetic hermeneutic. As my conclusion indicates, that consideration is incomplete and invites further development.

W.E.B. Du Bois once predicted that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.”<sup>42</sup> Launching from that statement, Joseph Evans writes:

These racially influenced constructs are embedded within and reinforced by Eurocentric aesthetics, interpretations and assumptions that claim *de facto* superiority over all other cultural norms. For most American whites these constructs gain hegemonic status; that is, they remain nearly invisible and unnoticed. For most whites, it has been always this way, and they are not aware of how the unholy trinity of racism, economic privilege, and political control gives

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<sup>41</sup> Lee in Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 165, using the ideas of Romans 8:38-39 and Jude 1:24.

<sup>42</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: McClurg, 1907), 10.

to them social advantages that citizens otherwise do not enjoy or socially qualify to receive.<sup>43</sup>

Noting the twenty-first-century continuation of that “unholy trinity of racism, economic privilege, and political control,” Evans presents race as the trio’s primary member, “the central problem facing people of the twenty-first century.”<sup>44</sup> The ongoing racial inequality shapes biblical interpretation (i.e. biblical hermeneutics), “creating two worlds: the white world informed by Eurocentric aesthetics, interpretation and its assumptions, and a world of color that is informed primarily by traditions and beliefs from African soils and other global regions inhabited by peoples of color.”<sup>45</sup> My analysis of Jarena Lee’s arguments, however, reveals a dimension beyond Evans’ “double-consciousness” of racial worlds and calls for a consideration of sex.

Woodyard argues for a depatriarchalizing in the study of prophetic rhetoric and grounds that argument in feminist biblical hermeneutics, which rescues biblical texts from patriarchal interpretation and provides liberating meanings. Her argument takes three major steps in this direction. First, it reveals that the Hebrew Bible, an ancient source of prophetic rhetoric,

contains the resources by which a gender-inclusive theory of the prophetic genre might be sustained. . . . Within feminist biblical hermeneutics, therefore, the prophetic-liberating principle is understood to “imply a rejection of every elevation of one social group against others as image and agent of God, every use of God to justify social domination and subjugation.”<sup>46</sup>

Second, Woodyard points out that the Hebrew Bible contains women communicating prophetically. In addition to the men whom Darsey analyzes to construct a theory of prophetic rhetoric, women who spoke prophetically in the Hebrew Bible include “Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14), and Isaiah’s wife (Isa. 8:3) . . . Sarah (Gen. 21:10-12), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:1 – 2:21), and Abigail (1 Sam. 25: 28-31).”<sup>47</sup> Third, Woodyard prescribes an incorporation of women into the tradition of prophetic rhetoric, including Angelina Grimké, Maria Stewart, and Sojourner Truth. The inclusion of Stewart and Truth suggests a need for consideration of womanist hermeneutics. Despite the value of Woodyard’s contribution, however, it stops short of incorporating womanist perspectives.

In addition to African American and feminist dimensions of biblical interpretation, understanding Jarena Lee’s rhetorical work requires a recognition of womanist perspectives, which entered scholarly literature more than a century and a half

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<sup>43</sup> Evans, “Double-Consciousness,” 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Woodyard, “Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory,” 30-32. Woodyard quotes Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 23.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. One or two of these references might be questionable, but Woodyard successfully identifies women acting prophetically.

after her autobiography.<sup>48</sup> Jones-Warsaw writes that “the task of a womanist biblical hermeneutic is to discover the significance and validity of the biblical text for black women who today experience the ‘tridimensional reality’ of racism, sexism, and classism.”<sup>49</sup> Lee spoke and wrote as a poor and African American woman, and any study of her words must recognize all three of those identities. Admitting her minimal education, Jarena Lee called for sexual equality in an African American community. The problem in the United States has never been the color line; it has always been a combination of race lines, sex lines, class lines, and other lines.

### Conclusion

Arguing for the right to preach in a religious culture shaped by patriarchy, Jarena Lee’s spiritual autobiography functioned prophetically. Lee accomplished this by appealing to scripture, theology, tradition, and experience. Her message fit Johnson’s definition of prophetic rhetoric by being “grounded in the sacred,” by being “rooted in a community experience,” and by offering “a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused.” Although she did not offer a communal hope, she proclaimed an individual hope. In all these ways, Jarena Lee confronted the leaders of the religious establishment in which she spoke and wrote.

This analysis of Lee’s autobiography demonstrates that prophetic rhetoric happens in various contexts. The community that prophetic rhetoric challenges may be a nation, a denomination, a local congregation, or another community at any level. In future studies of prophetic rhetoric in diverse contexts, new models will be needed. Current theoretical models, such as those in the referenced books by Johnson and Hobson, are designed to describe public discourse that addresses government-related concerns. While that discourse needs to be studied, so does the work of critiquing and challenging religious powers from within religious communities. The study of prophetic rhetoric should maintain a place for communication in and to religious communities.

In addition to diversifying the communities whose prophetic rhetoric is studied, scholars should include women in the canon of prophetic rhetoric. More than forty years ago, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell called for increased recognition of women in the history of rhetoric.<sup>50</sup> Kerith Woodyard issued a similar challenge to scholars of prophetic rhetoric.<sup>51</sup> To understand how prophetic rhetoric has challenged patriarchy, the study of prophetic rhetoric must grow beyond the patriarchal foundations of its recent development.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

<sup>49</sup> Koala Jones-Warsaw, “Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 22:1 (1994): 18-35. Jones-Warsaw quotes Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, AAR Academy Series, no. 64 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 202.

<sup>50</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 74-86.

<sup>51</sup> Woodyard, “Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory,” 36-37.

<sup>52</sup> Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 24. Woodyard, “Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory,” 29-30.

Furthermore, the study of prophetic rhetoric needs to consider not only sex, but also race and class. This essay takes one curative step, but much work remains to be done. I encourage womanist rhetoricians to contribute to this conversation, building on my essay's strengths and compensating for its limitations, facilitating a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of prophetic rhetoric.

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