

## Overcoming Doubt in a Spiritual Narrative: the Challenges Jarena Lee Faced in Pursuit of Her Calling

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# Overcoming Doubt in a Spiritual Narrative:

## The Challenges Jarena Lee Faced in Pursuit of Her Calling

[ EMILY DIETRICH ]

First published in 1849, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee* details the spiritual journey of Jarena Lee, the first female preacher of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>1</sup> A poor black woman, Lee's life is marked by a myriad of difficulties from a lack of education and financial funds, to multiple bouts of physical and (potentially mental) illness. However, in the greater context of Lee's pursuit to preach the gospel, these difficulties pale in comparison to the nontangible challenges she faces over the course of her religious career. Perhaps the most salient of these challenges takes shape as Lee is repeatedly forced to confront both her own self-doubt about her abilities and experiences as well as her doubts about society. Despite wavering under the strain of such trials, Lee perseveres by deferring her judgement to God's greater will and using her own argumentative skills therein making her religious work even more noteworthy.

The first challenge Lee faces in pursuit of her calling to preach the gospel is her internalized sense of self-doubt. From the moment that Lee receives God's mission to "Go preach the Gospel," she is instantly filled with dread and vocalizes her worries to God by replying, "No one will believe."<sup>2</sup> Not only does this exchange reveal the lack of faith Lee has in society to accept her preaching (Lee is aware that a female preacher breaks Christian doctrine and therefore expects society to dismiss her), it also reveals the lack of faith Lee has in her ability to challenge Christian doctrine and effectively communicate God's greatness. This doubt is further reflected when, even after Lee resolves to tell the Reverend Richard Allen

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1 Jarena Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," in *Spiritual Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (1836; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 97.

2 Ibid., 10.

about her holy duty, her courage fails her multiple times on her journey to meet with him. As Lee relates to readers:

As I drew near [Reverend Allen's house]...my courage began to fail me; so terrible did the cross appear, it seemed that I should not be able to bear it...so agitated was my mind, that my appetite for my daily food failed me entirely. Several times on my way there, I turned back again.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Lee's trepidation and her repeated attempts to give in to her doubts, Lee eventually finds the courage she needs to overcome her fears by putting her faith solely in the Lord. Similar to how she was previously saved from her suicidal ideation via "the unseen arm of God," she is once more guided by the Lord as she finds solace the closer she comes to Allen's house and fulfilling the first step of her God-given mission.<sup>4</sup> Lee explains that "I soon found that the nearer I approached to the house of the minister, the less was my fear. Accordingly, as soon as I came to the door, my fears subsided, the cross was removed, all things appeared pleasant – I was tranquil."<sup>5</sup> In fully submitting to God's greater will, Lee is able to let go of her doubts in society and herself and begin the pursuit of her calling.

And yet, a lack of faith in society and her abilities isn't the only doubt Lee suffers on her journey to preaching the gospel. Following the Lord's repeated message to preach, Lee begins to worry that the voice she's hearing belongs to Satan instead of God. "At first I supposed that Satan had spoken to me," Lee describes, "for I had read that he could transform himself into an angel of light for the purpose of deception."<sup>6</sup> While at first glance this passage may seem to indicate that Lee lacks faith in God's message, consideration of her previous experiences with Satan suggest that what she actually lacks faith in is herself and her ability to withstand the devil's machinations. Just as Satan nearly drove her to take her own life under the guise of paying for her sins, she now fears that Satan is prompting her to challenge Christian doctrine under the guise of preaching the gospel and spreading Christianity. In an effort to combat this doubt and determine whether or not God wants her to preach the gospel, Lee seeks solace in a "secret place" where she calls "upon the Lord to know if he had called [her] to preach, and whether [she] was deceived or not."<sup>7</sup> In deferring her judgment to God's greater will, Lee receives a vision of, "a pulpit, with a Bible lying thereon," which she interprets as a sign that God

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3 *Ibid.*, 11.

4 *Ibid.*, 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 11.

6 *Ibid.*, 10.

7 *Ibid.*

truly wants her to preach the gospel.<sup>8</sup> Just as she finds reassurance in God when walking to meet with Reverend Allen, Lee also finds reassurance in Him when she fears that Satan is once more manipulating her to meet his devious ends. As such, Lee is freed from her self-doubt and able to progress onward toward achieving her goal.

In addition to facing the internal challenge of self-doubt in pursuit of her calling, Lee also faces the external challenge of society's doubt. This is perhaps best exemplified by Reverend Richard Allen's response to Lee's appeal to preach the gospel when he explains that their religious sect does "not call for women preachers."<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, Lee faces immense bias as the very person she looks up to and seeks guidance from judges her unworthy of preaching the scripture simply because of her sex. For eight years Allen remains steadfast in his bias, barring Lee from her true calling, over the course of which Lee builds up her skillset by exhorting and holding prayer meetings in various residences.<sup>10</sup> However, one day in church, Lee challenges Allen's doubts once and for all when in a religious fervor she spontaneously preaches to the congregation about her mission from God and how she has thus far dallied.<sup>11</sup> In this outburst, Lee demonstrates to Allen her passion for and ability to preach the gospel, finally prompting him to see the fault in his previous judgement of her. Furthermore, by making her desire publicly known, Lee covertly forces Allen's hand as he must either accept her calling in an effort to protect his image or shamefully deny her request in front of the entire congregation. Therefore, it is via her God-inspired passion (and perhaps unintended manipulation of Allen) that Lee triumphs over Allen's sexist doubts and earns the right to preach the gospel in a proper setting.

Nevertheless, Lee, aware that many readers of her text might possess similar biases, is not content in having convinced only Reverend Allen of her worthiness to preach. Although she overcomes Allen's doubts in her abilities, Lee continues to face society's doubts in her authority. Cognizant of her readers, Lee takes full advantage of her journal by transforming it into a mini sermon complete with biblical references that argues in favor of a woman's right to preach the gospel. Carefully designed as a point-by-point argument, Lee addresses the concerns of detractors by conceding that "how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life."<sup>12</sup> This is promptly followed by Lee's reasoning that if Mary Magdalene (the first person to preach of Jesus's resurrection) and Jesus's disciples (who

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 11.

10 Ibid., 15.

11 Ibid., 17.

12 Ibid., 11.

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preached under the authority of inspiration instead of education) were allowed to preach the gospel, she should similarly be allowed to preach the gospel. Further cementing her argument, Lee cites the notion that if men can preach because Jesus died for their sins, women should also be allowed to preach given he died for their sins as well.<sup>13</sup> By structuring her argument in this format, Lee uses her wit, communication skills, and knowledge of Christian canon to make a direct appeal to readers that not only combats society's sexist doubts but also demonstrates her authority.

By detailing and examining the challenges Lee faced in pursuit of her calling, one can better comprehend the authority with which Lee preached. In confiding with readers, the personal doubts she's held about not only herself but society, Lee highlighted her own earthly imperfections making her not only a sympathetic character but also an inspirational one. For, having journeyed from being under Satan's spell to helping others find communion with the Holy Spirit, Lee's journey invites readers to relate to her struggles while demonstrating how anyone can find salvation if they commit their souls to God. As such, Lee's ever-evolving relationship with God and her subsequent perseverance is rendered all the more noteworthy as they paint a realistic portrayal of the struggles of faith—doubts and all.

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13 Ibid, 11-12.