DEDICATED WOMEN: TWO WOMEN OF COLOR IN THE ANTEBELLUM PERIOD PROCLAIMING THEIR SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY TO PREACH

by

Anne Elizabeth Brown

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
Religious Studies

Charlotte

2024

Approved by:

_____

Dr. Julia Robinson Moore

_____

Dr. Sean McCloud

_____

Dr. Janaka Lewis

ABSTRACT

ANNE ELIZABETH BROWN. Dedicated Women: Two Women of Color in the Antebellum Period Proclaiming Their Spiritual Authority to Preach. (Under the direction of DR. JULIA ROBINSON MOORE)

During the antebellum period in America, Black women preachers had to navigate limitations imposed on them based on their gender and race as they responded to God's call on their lives. Despite being certain about their calls to preach, they were silenced by the male religious leaders of their time, and they were often further dissuaded by members of their families and communities. Most Christian denominations prohibited women from holding official roles as preachers, or even preaching inside churches in an unofficial capacity, and the idea was deemed unseemly by entire communities; thus, these women had to forge their own paths to follow God's call to preach.[1]

Several Black women preachers during this period authored autobiographies through which they not only provided Christian witness to their experiences and faith, but also claimed and proclaimed their spiritual authority to preach. These women did not wait for permission to tell their stories, they seized the power to do so on their own. Autobiographies by women in any context were rare at that time and the expectation for women to observe proper decorum was so prevalent that having the audacity to publish their stories was a definitive step into what had traditionally been male territory. Particularly in the Christian church, women were expected to be proper and controlled so presenting oneself in the public eye with a message of Christianity

[1] William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 5.

challenged the male dominance present in the church; even the act of ensuring their stories were recorded was itself a demonstration of defiance and agency.

I examine the autobiographies of two such women, Harriet A. Baker and Julia A. J. Foote, to identify similarities and differences between their experiences, attitudes, and actions, and to investigate the roles their autobiographies played in their claims of spiritual authority. The primary questions shaping my argument are: How did Harriet Baker and Julia Foote, through their autobiographies, challenge gender roles and establish religious authority to preach? What do their life stories reveal about race and gender oppression within religious communities? I show that the creation of their autobiographies was an integral part of their lives and ministries; the autobiographies both told of their experiences and served to stake their claim of authority to preach. Baker and Foote demonstrated courage and conviction by being among the earliest women of color to take this bold step.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Julia Robinson Moore for sparking my interest in this topic during our directed reading course and then for enthusiastically agreeing to chair my thesis committee. Her comments on my various ideas and draft documents always awakened something in me that enabled me to see more completely and from new perspectives. My final thesis is much the better for her invaluable input and I am grateful for the countless hours she spent reading each revision. I would also like to thank Dr. Sean McCloud for serving on my committee and providing a unique perspective emphasizing rhetorical analysis. He also pushed me to narrow my focus, including the suggestion that I think of this as one chapter of a book I may one day write. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Dr. Janaka Lewis for serving on my committee and providing yet another perspective on literature from which to consider my research. Her questions and suggestions resulted in a more complete project. You each propelled me through this project at times when I was lost in the details, and I appreciate each of you!

I would also like to thank the entire faculty of the Religious Studies department for shepherding me through an endeavor (the RELS M.A. program) that was so totally foreign to me. I owe you a debt of gratitude for helping me break away from my background in business and learn to appreciate, in every sense of the word, the humanities. Your patience, persistence, and prodding have forever changed me… in a good way!

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my best friend and husband, Larry, and to our wonderful family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"For those being called, especially those on the margins, the call of God is more powerful even than cultural mores of gender, class, and race. The call is such a compelling summons that the one called has no other choice but to preach."[2]

—Donna Giver-Johnston

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

The history of African American religion has been underrepresented in scholarship, particularly the contributions of women of color in African American religion. Prominent scholars have made remarkable progress in these areas of study over the last half century; however, there is still much to learn about the past that has yet to be explored. My scholarship focuses on two Black women who participated in African American Christianity as preachers during the antebellum period and beyond. I have examined the autobiographies of Harriet A. Baker and Julia A. J. Foote[3] to learn about their lives, how they discerned God's call to preach, and the ways they challenged the patriarchal church leadership of their time in order to honor God's call.

My use of autobiographies as primary sources reveals the power of that written form to carve out spaces of legitimacy for women, especially Black women in religious contexts infused with patriarchy. Autobiographies by women in any context were rare at that time and the expectation for women to observe proper decorum was so prevalent that having the audacity to publish their stories was a definitive step into what had traditionally been male territory.

---

[2] Donna Giver-Johnston, *Claiming the Call to Preach: Four Female Pioneers of Preaching in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 7.

[3] The reader will note that I use Baker's and Foote's first names in the thesis sections summarizing and comparing their autobiographies when describing details of their life stories and their last names when referring to the authorship perspective of their stories. This is a stylistic choice to bring their stories to life and make them more relatable.

Particularly in the Christian church, women were expected to be proper and controlled so presenting oneself in the public eye with a message of Christianity challenged the male dominance present in the church; even the act of ensuring their stories were recorded was itself a demonstration of defiance and agency.

Baker and Foote were two free Black women who, despite being subjected to racial and gender discrimination, succeeded in becoming preachers with fruitful ministries and, of equal importance, ensured their life stories were published. A study of just two women from nearly two hundred years ago may seem inconsequential; however, Baker's and Foote's autobiographies bear witness to the significance of overcoming obstacles in fulfilling their ministerial vocations or sense of call to the ministry as preachers. These pioneering women exercised their agency to create narratives that privileged Black women as viable religious subjects.

My thesis focuses on Baker's and Foote's writings and lives with an eye toward the connection between their spirituality and the way they challenged cultural expectations to overcome the struggles of a patriarchal church and society. Religious studies, as an academic discipline, provides a critical analysis of the role of religion, and religious expression, in relation and response to power structures, inequity, identity, resistance, and political influence. Hence, this is my primary framework, but I overlay the lens of race and gender by centering on the narratives of these two Black preaching women who are representative of other free Black women convinced of their call to preach yet denied the support of the church.

Research Question and Thesis Statement

The primary questions shaping my argument are: How did Harriet Baker and Julia Foote, through their autobiographies, challenge gender roles and establish religious authority to preach? What do their life stories reveal about race and gender oppression within religious communities?

Baker's and Foote's life stories and ministries serve as compelling narratives that illuminate their navigation of patriarchal constraints on women preaching within African American Christian denominations during and after the antebellum period. In particular, the authoritarian male leadership of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion denominations at that time would not permit women access to the pulpit, insisting that the rules of Methodism precluded women from being officially recognized as preachers. Through their resilience, agency, innovative approaches, and devout faith in God, the two women successfully challenged these prevailing gender norms clearly establishing their spiritual authority to preach and securing their place within the African American church. In their autobiographies, they identify and describe the source of their spiritual authority with the descriptions of their conversions to Christianity, calls to preach, and subsequent ministries demonstrating how they held to, and employed, this spiritual authority to persevere. Baker and Foote did not wait for permission to tell their stories, they seized the power to do so, and by creating their autobiographies well into their ministries they were able to document their success as itinerant preachers. This gained the attention of the church, which eventually paved the way for them to accomplish their goals of being officially recognized as preachers.

Significance of the Study

My thesis illuminates the challenges free women of color faced in pursuing leadership positions in the church during the antebellum period by examining what two Black women preachers revealed about these challenges and the ways they persisted despite the barriers intended to limit them. By bringing their autobiographies to the forefront, I disclose the obstacles Baker and Foote faced resulting from the patriarchal leadership of the AME and AME Zion denominations during their time, as well as societal norms of the day, and how the two women

responded to fulfill God's call to preach. I focus on their autobiographies both in terms of the religious experiences they describe and how the very act of documenting their life stories centered on Christianity empowered them. Placing the autobiographies of these two pioneering women at the center of my study to examine their stories, as well as their personal motivation to document their experiences, fills a gap in the current scholarship in terms of gender analysis within the Black Church. Most importantly, I reveal what their autobiographies tell us about their claims of spiritual authority to preach, and how their intentionality in capturing their life stories supported those claims.

Methodology and Limitations

Autobiographies as Religious Texts and Rhetorical Strategies

Looking back to the antebellum period, Baker and Foote were among the earliest Black women to challenge the gender and racial oppression under which they lived by making their voices and religious experiences known. Their stories tell how they persisted regarding their spiritual authority to preach, but they also created documents that are themselves religious texts. To be sure, they "wrote about their lives for the edification of their contemporaries and the enlightenment of future generations,"[4] but they also used their autobiographies to witness to God's love and power. Their autobiographies were also employed as a rhetorical strategy aimed at reshaping the ecclesial and societal gender norms of their time. These norms and mores relegated women to support roles rather than making room for their front and center witness and leadership. By telling their own stories, they controlled the narrative ensuring both authenticity from their unique perspectives and capturing their religious experiences in the way best suited to make their points thus painting a picture for their readers.

---

[4] Marilyn Richardson, "Foreword," in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), ix.

Selection Criteria for Autobiographies

I chose to study Baker and Foote because their stories captivated me, and I felt there was more to their autobiographies than the stories of their lives; I now see these documents also served as a Christian witness and the women's intentional acts of preserving their stories was part of their claim of spiritual authority. Baker and Foote were among a longer list of women I considered who were affiliated with the AME and AME Zion churches, two of the most prominent African American Christian denominations during that time, and many of those women had similar experiences of being called by God and rejected by the church.

My goal was to hear directly from Black women preachers about their experiences and I was driven to find a new source, a woman not yet studied, or studied in a limited way. Harriet Baker was that woman, and I owe thanks to Bettye Collier-Thomas who, in *Daughters of Thunder*, introduced me to Baker. After reading about Baker in Collier-Thomas's work, I sought to find additional information about Baker, and it was nearly impossible. I discovered she has not been widely studied and she is rarely mentioned by name, so my research demonstrates that there are lessons to be learned from other than the more well-known historical examples. I was intrigued by Collier-Thomas's pairing of Foote, a much more widely studied Black preaching woman, with Baker in her study of their sermons and decided to build upon that by focusing on the autobiographies of these two dedicated women.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

To investigate the ways in which women such as Baker and Foote navigated traditional limits on women preaching in African American Christian denominations during the antebellum period, I employed a comprehensive research approach. In addition to examining their autobiographies, I conducted a review of historical literature to gain an understanding of the

socio-religious context in which they lived and worked, including histories of the AME and AME Zion denominations. I also consulted references to gain perspective on various underlying frameworks including rhetorical analysis and women and gender studies. These secondary sources included books and journal articles with publication dates ranging from 1972 to 2023.

My primary sources were Baker's and Foote's autobiographies and, by comparing these primary sources, I was able to identify similarities and differences between their life stories and ministries as well as their writing styles and rhetorical strategies. These primary sources revealed their conversion and sanctification stories which drove them in the pursuit of their God-given right to preach.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

In her article "Invisible Women: On Women and Gender in the Study of African American Religious History," Judith Weisenfeld identifies potential pitfalls in a study of this nature that influenced the way I approached my study. She acknowledges the limitation of one's academic discipline, in her case history, that influences the interpretation of data.[5] I acknowledge my own limitations as they relate to this study: as a white woman in the twenty-first century, my social and racial contexts are incongruent with the women I studied. In addition, my academic training is in business so any perspective from disciplines in the humanities or social sciences comes primarily from the past three years of religious studies, or from resources I consulted from other disciplines. These limitations were difficult to set aside or get past, so I was cautious about any influence they had on my perception or understanding of the materials I examined.

[5] Judith Weisenfeld, "Invisible Women: On Women and Gender in the Study of African American Religious History," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 135.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As background for my thesis, I examined existing literature to build a framework for my research. This included a brief overview of scholarship on African American religion and gender and a deeper look at the growth of Christianity among the earliest African American communities. It also included a search for studies on the roles of Black women in religious life, including how these roles were limited by others and how certain women of color employed self-determination to rise above those limitations. Lastly, I investigated African American Methodist denominations that came into existence early in the nineteenth century and grew to prominence after the Civil War. These distinct but overlapping topics are critical to my research by both identifying the current state of related scholarship and providing a foundation for the era and circumstances I seek to understand.

Scholarship on African American Religion and Gender

There were notable scholars of Black history and the church, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; however, African American studies grew in academic prominence in the wake of the civil rights movement during the late 1960s.[6] Subsequently, scholarly attention specific to African American religion expanded beginning in the late 1970s with scholars such as Albert J. Raboteau at the forefront. In 1970, the women's rights movement and the advent of Black studies inspired the creation of women's studies as an academic discipline wherein gender served as a lens for the study of the human experience independent of the masculine normativity that prevailed.[7] The early discipline of women's studies used feminism as a lens that was generally limited to exploring the experiences of white women, and it was the 1980s before scholars began to differentiate the study of the

[6] Erin Blakemore, "The Origins of African American Studies, Explained," *National Geographic*, February 13, 2023.
[7] NPR Staff. "A Look Back at Women's Studies Since the 1970s," *NPR*, March 17, 2010.

experiences of Black women in a discipline often referred to as womanism or womanist studies. This is particularly important to my topic because it is a movement borne out of the unique struggles of Black women, yet has a universalist focus on eliminating the societal ideology of domination pervasive in Western culture.[8]

The disciplines of religious studies, Africana studies, and women's studies—feminist and womanist—are all now well-established in academia; however, the double exclusion of women of color attributable to both their race and gender results in limited research conducted on their unique religious experiences and influence.[9] It is also noteworthy that most of the research in this area has been conducted by Black scholars and there has been a lack of attention by white scholars to this history and religious expression. Religious studies, through integration with the disciplines of Africana studies and women's studies, is well-suited to analyze intersections of marginalization and reveal, as one example, the history of religions excluding women of color from leadership roles. The discipline of religious studies has not made this contribution to the extent it could have with a more intentional integration of race and gender analyses; however, scholars such as Bettye Collier-Thomas, Jualynne Dodson, and Donna Giver-Johnston have made remarkable strides in this area, as I explore in the sections to follow.

Early African American Religion

I began my study of early African American religion with Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* which is a study of African

---

[8] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 38.

[9] Delores S. Williams, in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, identifies the complexity of oppression faced by Black women and how their exploitation is oversimplified in scholarship (178-203). bell hooks, in *ain't I a woman: black women and feminism*, argues that the continued dehumanizing of black women is rooted in anti-woman mythology and perpetuated by ongoing racism and sexism in present-day scholarship (51-86). These are just two of a great number of the scholarly arguments of Black women identifying the misconstructions of scholarship on the experiences of Black women.

American religion from the perspective of slaves. Raboteau considers the ways in which the experience of slavery impacted early African American religion setting out to show that, despite "black religious institutions [being] the foundation of Afro-American culture," there had, up to that point, been insufficient study of "black religion under slavery."[10] Raboteau's points translate well into my thesis with one of my observations being that, although "black religion" has become more studied, an entire subsection of the population has been largely ignored—that is women of color, particularly those who were called by God to be leaders in the church.

Raboteau identifies the limited scholarship he encountered was partly a result of "the assumption that sources for a study of slave religion simply do not exist"[11] and he refutes that assumption by "[investigating] slave narratives, black autobiographies, and black folklore in order to gather, literally out of the mouths of former slaves, the story of their religious experiences during slavery."[12] Following Raboteau's example, I set out to "hear" from nineteenth-century women of color themselves how their unique, gendered experience of responding to God's call sustained them and cleared the way for their eventual acceptance as preachers.

In his exploration of slaves' religious lives, Raboteau looks at the prevalent tenets of Christianity that were being imposed on the enslaved and what they made of it, including how they lived their religion individually and in community. Raboteau points out that "…slaves did not simply become Christians; they creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement in America."[13] Similarly, the women I studied framed their

---

[10] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978; reis. 2004), ix.
[11] Raboteau, ix.
[12] Raboteau, x.
[13] Raboteau, 209.

Christianity based on their experience as women of color. Just as Raboteau refutes the notion that there was an absence of primary sources for the study of slave religion, I demonstrate that these sources exist also for the women I studied, and others like them. By studying their autobiographies, I was able to give shape to the ways in which they confronted the disconnect between the clear call from God to preach and the ways male leaders of Black denominations interfered with their ability to do so.

Through Raboteau's use of primary sources describing the conversion experience of slaves and the ways they were taught the lessons of religion, he shows how the research of African American religion can be conducted, and his findings and assertions are extensive. I have used his methods and findings to contextualize my own research, while also recognizing that he misses the opportunity for a deeper gender analysis thereby leaving the experience of female slaves mostly unexplored.[14] My work unveils the women I studied to reveal the extent of their self-determination through the publication of their autobiographies.

Similar to Raboteau, Julius Bailey makes the case about African American religion being underrepresented in scholarly research. His focus, however, is markedly different from Raboteau's in that Bailey's book, *Down in the Valley: An Introduction to African American Religious History*, presents a wide variety of religions in response to what he felt was conspicuously absent from prior studies of African American religion. Bailey argues that introductory courses and texts for the study of African American religions fail to adequately address "the religious beliefs and practices embraced by African Americans [that] have been as diverse as the perspectives present in the black community."[15] In other words, studies of African

[14] Raboteau acknowledges, in the afterword of the 2004 edition of *Slave Religion*, that he had neglected the experiences of women, 332.
[15] Julius H. Bailey, *Down in the Valley: An Introduction to African American Religious History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), xxx.

American religions have been overly simplified by focusing on one, or just a few, religions rather than tackling the diverse religious beliefs and practices adopted by African Americans and the individualism from which they were and are created. Bailey addresses this concern by utilizing an "integrative approach interweaving the experiences of members of nonwestern traditions and other traditionally marginalized communities within the broader historical narrative."[16]

Bailey begins by creating a natural foundation from West African religious traditions and describing how these flowed into the religious experience of Africans enslaved in America, eventually resulting in the creation of the earliest African American religious institutions. He then addresses the enduring themes of these early religious experiences, most notably how the traditional religions "were transformed, as they had been for centuries, to make sense of their current context and conditions."[17] This theme speaks to how the women I studied transformed their religious experiences to adapt to the conditions they faced as women seeking to be Christian leaders. Bailey similarly identifies new and distinct religious movements to make his point about the present-day complexities of any attempt to characterize African American religion. The multiplicity and interrelatedness are powerful factors to make Bailey's point—any one-dimensional view or understanding of African American religion is inadequate because it fails to recognize the many ways African Americans "[embraced] identities that they found empowering and instilled hope."[18] My research shows that women of color who felt called to leadership of the early African American church uniquely embraced their own identities, including their gender, as a place to find empowerment and hope.

---

[16] Bailey, xxx.
[17] Bailey, xii.
[18] Bailey, 124.

Bailey's and Raboteau's findings, principally regarding Christianity in slave communities, provide an understanding of the religious tradition and environment in which the women of my study lived. African American Christianity that originated during the period of slavery in the United States had qualities distinctive from the Christianity whites attempted to promulgate among those they enslaved. The methods of proselytizing employed by white evangelists, including repetition of doctrine and methodical catechism, were inconsistent with the inseparable sacred and secular lives of enslaved persons and disparate from worship practices they had brought from Africa; hence, the whites' evangelizing had minimal success.[19] Also, the enslaved knew whites used select passages from the Bible to justify slavery; however, despite this, those enslaved did not outright reject Christianity. "Rather than the repeated message of 'Slaves be obedient to your masters,' enslaved Africans found a message that provided hope and empowerment to make it through their daily struggles."[20] Biblical passages from the Exodus story of deliverance through the messages of Jesus' suffering and resurrection resonated with Black persons enslaved in America thus instilling hope; they related to the ways Jesus challenged the power structures of his time which empowered them to resist white oppression in their own time.[21] It is important to also note that "[the] meaning [enslaved persons found in their religion] was not so much an answer to the problem of suffering as the acceptance of the sorrow and the joy inherent in the human condition and an affirmation that life itself was valuable."[22]

In addition to the unique origins of African American Christianity, the worship practices of enslaved African Americans also differed from those of white persons to the same extent that their life situations and experiences differed. Two major factors influenced this distinctiveness:

---

[19] Bailey, 30.
[20] Bailey 31.
[21] Bailey, 50.
[22] Raboteau, 258.

one was their African heritage, and the other was their experience of slavery. Although Africans who were captured and brought to the Americas "came from many different nations, tribes, and language groups, … [there were] similar modes of perception, shared basic principles, and common patterns of ritual [that] were widespread among different West African religions."[23] The unique Christianity they fashioned embodied their African heritage just as it reflected their dedication to God despite their experience of enslavement, thus affirming their identity as human beings beloved by God.

A central element of the Christian worship of enslaved persons was "the spontaneous, improvised slave spiritual" which was borne from their African "traditional musical heritage" to address the horrors and pain they endured in enslavement, as well as their enduring hope for freedom from bondage.[24] Spirituals "emerged as communal songs, heard, felt, sung and often danced with hand-clapping, foot-stamping, head-shaking excitement."[25] The pain experienced by individuals was acknowledged by the congregation through the singing of spirituals, hence, "[the] individual received consolation for sorrow and gained a heightening of joy because his experience was shared."[26] The singing of spirituals, accompanied by dance or other movement, also expressed the "contact between God and humans [that] occurred in worship and praise services."[27] For these reasons, the experience of singing spirituals was "both an intensely personal and vividly communal experience"[28] through which slaves expressed their longing for freedom, both physical and spiritual. These distinctive aspects of African American Christianity paint a picture of the all-consuming, private and public, nature of the religious lives of many free

[23] Raboteau, 7.
[24] Bailey, 49.
[25] Raboteau, 243.
[26] Raboteau, 246.
[27] Bailey, 49.
[28] Raboteau, 246.

and enslaved Black persons which explicates the commitment and sacrifices they were willing to make to and for the sake of the gospel.

In the southern states, slaves frequently had to hide their community's religious practices because of the suspicions or outright hostility of their masters. "In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors ('hush harbors') the slaves made Christianity truly their own;"[29] here they were free to worship in their own unique ways. These hidden meetings were also in response to slaves' frustration with messages they heard when permitted to attend their white masters' churches; these messages instructed them to obey and be submissive. Free Black persons in the northern states faced similar challenges to their Christian worship. Attending white churches, they faced discrimination, being denied leadership roles or having a voice in church organization and operations; even during worship they were relegated to separate areas of the church and treated as inferiors.

The study of African American religions is well-served by the disparate approaches employed by Bailey and Raboteau and their unique findings. They demonstrate that not only is there significant diversity in African American religions, but there is also diversity in the methods of studying these religions. However, while Raboteau and Bailey center their research on African American religious life, they do so from a limited perspective; they do not place the voices of women within the center of their research, rather they leave them on the periphery. I begin my study considering early African American Christianity broadly as it related to Christianity as practiced by white persons and then, more specifically, how it was experienced by women of color called by God to be leaders in the church. White women faced the same types of obstacles when called to leadership in the church; however, my study is concerned with the

[29] Raboteau, 212.

coalescence of race and gender that impacted every aspect of life for Black women, including their ability to hold leadership roles in the church.

The Roles of Women of Color in Religious Life

As I turned my attention to the religious experiences of Black women within African American Christianity with the intention of placing them clearly at the center of my research, I identified the following scholars as resources, notably all but one of whom are women. They each contribute uniquely to an understanding of the roles of women of color in religious life.

First, and most closely linked to my subject and research question, I explored *Claiming the Call to Preach: Four Female Pioneers of Preaching in Nineteenth-Century America* by Donna Giver-Johnston. The author took up this study with an eye to her own experience of what she perceived, at the age of twelve, to be God's call to ministry and the response she received from her church and family. At that time, she was a member of the Roman Catholic Church, and her claim of being called to ministry was summarily dismissed. Years later, while visiting a Presbyterian Church, she saw a woman preaching and was so moved that she pursued her own calling, eventually being ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).[30] Giver-Johnston "began to realize that [her] story and the stories of other women [she] had met were only part of a bigger story of women's call to preach: a story of denial, oppression, exclusion, and silence, but also of claim, affirmation, practice, and celebration—what [she calls] a 'narrative of neglect.'"[31] [32]

Giver-Johnston makes several poignant observations in her text: one is that when men are called to ministry and accept the call to preach, it is an occasion for family and community

[30] Giver-Johnston, ix.
[31] Giver-Johnston, x.
[32] Autobiographies address this neglect by serving as a medium of agency and even resistance to racism and patriarchy for Black women.

celebration; however, this is not the case for women. She explains that there are two aspects of being called: one is the divine summons experienced by the individual and the other is the church's endorsement; she refers to the former as an "inward call" and the latter as an "outward call,"[33] and without the outward call there can be no community celebration. Many times, individuals—both men and women—who are called by God question the calling or themselves and wrestle with accepting the call, and God speaks to them through others, often members or leaders of their churches, to reinforce the call. Giver-Johnston aptly states, "Ecclesiastical denominations and individual churches exercise power over the outward call to preach. But this power is not just institutionalized; it is an everyday, socialized, and embodied phenomenon,"[34] and "[women] find themselves in a liminal place betwixt and between the already-received divine call and the not-yet-realized ecclesial call."[35] I believe the two women I chose to study, finding themselves in this "liminal place," employed their autobiographies to bridge their inward and outward calls by proclaiming their spiritual authority to preach in order to secure the endorsement of the church. The feminist/womanist implications of this study are to shine a light on the ways withholding the endorsement of the church from women seeking to preach blocked their access to the power of the pulpit which was yet one more way to normalize the subjugation of women.

To explore the rhetorical genre of autobiography, I examined William Andrews' *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, in which the author presents the autobiographies of three Black preaching women from the same period I have studied. Andrews introduces the reprinted narratives making the case that they are important as

[33] Giver-Johnston, 2.
[34] Giver-Johnston, 19.
[35] Giver-Johnston, 34.

both literary and historical documents. Early in his introduction, he states that the autobiographies he studies "make female self-determination [their] fundamental theme… with [arguments] for women's spiritual authority that plainly challenged traditional female roles as defined in both the free and the slave states, among whites as well as blacks."[36] The authors' authority is also established by the very act of creating autobiographies which serve as a medium of power and identity construction for Black women. Throughout most of his introduction, however, Andrews focuses on these texts primarily for the religious aspects of conversion, justification, and sanctification indicating they intend to witness to other believers. I do not disagree, but I have also considered the texts as social statements, or proclamations, intending to establish the authors' right or authority to preach regardless of their gender, which harkens back to Andrews's initial statements.

Another scholar whose text closely mirrors my observations and intent is Bettye Collier-Thomas. Early in her preface to *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, Collier-Thomas laments that while she was conducting research for her doctoral dissertation in the early 1970s, she "became acutely aware of the absence of black women in published histories about the African American community."[37] Her purpose in writing *Daughters of Thunder* was "to explore the history of African American preaching women and the issues and struggles they confronted in their efforts to function as ministers and to become ordained;"[38] her primary focus is on their sermons in contrast to Andrews's emphasis on their autobiographies. Collier-Thomas seeks to answer several questions about the identity of the

[36] Andrews, 2.
[37] Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), xiii.
[38] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, xv.

women whose sermons she studies, their experiences, and their pursuit of becoming ordained ministers.

One woman preacher she reflects on is Foote, and her analysis of Foote's sermons illuminates that Foote's preaching is shaped by her gender. Foote asserts that both men and women are called by God, and she contends that rejecting the preaching of women is counter to the teachings of scripture.[39] Collier-Thomas shares that Foote served as an itinerant preacher and evangelist for over fifty years before becoming "the first woman to be ordained a deacon [in 1895] and in 1899 was the second woman to be ordained an elder in the AME Zion Church."[40] Regarding Foote's autobiography, Collier-Thomas notes that Foote "presents a strong feminist argument for including women preachers in the Christian Church polity."[41]

Collier-Thomas also discusses Baker saying, "…[Baker's] belief that only God can sanction one to preach, and that sanctification frees one from the constraints of society's authorities, is clearly present in her sermons on Christ's passion and crucifixion."[42] Furthermore, "[her] sermons reveal a social message… for she brilliantly orchestrates powerful, if subtle, challenges to her audience's suspicions of female religious leaders."[43] Baker served as an evangelist for fifteen years before being appointed, by the AME Conference, to the pastorate of a church in Pennsylvania which was possibly a first for a woman in the AME church; this was subsequent to the denomination's decision to license evangelists irrespective of gender.[44] (The introduction of licensing for evangelists was the AME denomination's answer to women demanding to be permitted to preach, while it avoided conceding to ordination for women; there

[39] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 57-63.
[40] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 59.
[41] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 59.
[42] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 73.
[43] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 73.
[44] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 72.

were few men licensed as evangelists, likely since ordination was an alternative available to them.) Collier-Thomas indicates that "[the] 1987 reprint of *The Colored Lady Evangelist* reintroduced scholars to Harriet A. Baker, a once well-known late-nineteenth-century AME preacher,"[45] and although there is no indication that Baker was ever formally ordained, she was a famed preacher among both Black and white communities across the Northeast.[46]

I conducted my research with an appreciation for Collier-Thomas's main argument – "[the] study of black women and religion is crucial to our understanding of American and black religion. A focus on black churchwomen's experiences changes the nature of African American history and introduces new dimensions to the discourse on religious tradition and authority, which have been traditionally defined as male history."[47] Several of Collier-Thomas's findings drive home her point about this work changing history and deepening the discourse of tradition and authority, which added fuel to my pursuit of the subject. One such example is from hand-written notes she found that document yearly meetings of black Methodist preachers; this was the Washington Annual Conference that occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Collier-Thomas was seeking to understand the concerns that were discussed during these meetings and one of those concerns was "women's proper role in the Church polity and their deportment in the church."[48] It is disheartening, but not entirely surprising, to learn that the discussion after eighteen years of meetings turned to "the question, 'Is woman inferior to man?'" and the convictions of the men in attendance were summed up in a statement by the meeting chairman, "'Sad as it may be, woman is as inferior to man as man is to God.'"[49] This single

[45] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 69. (It is noteworthy that the version of *The Colored Lady Evangelist* I obtained is a reprint from 2016 which indicates there is a continuing interest in this manuscript.)
[46] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 72.
[47] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 1.
[48] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, xiv.
[49] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, xiv.

statement accentuates the pervasiveness of the obstacles women faced attributable to their perceived status both within the church and in the broader community. As Collier-Thomas concludes, however, "In spite of all the opposition, African American women continue to forge ahead, preaching and teaching, determined to pursue a ministry ordained by God himself."[50]

Upon concluding my review of these texts most closely related to my topic, I consulted additional sources for more generalized background on the roles of women in African American religion and religious life, in general, and the AME and AME Zion churches, in particular. This helped me understand the ways the two women I studied might have come to their own religion and religious experiences.

In Tracey Hucks's article, "'Burning with a Flame in America': African American Women in African-Derived Traditions," the author argues that "African Americans historically have engaged in the negotiation of multiple religious worlds for accessing spiritual power and for obtaining alternative modes of healing and recovery," and "this has been especially true for African American women."[51] Hucks asserts the need for multidisciplinary approaches to "unveil the myriad ways that black women have generated religious meaning."[52] This speaks directly to my study of the ways that Baker and Foote contributed to African American Christianity through their own personal religious meaning-making in response to God's call on their lives. As Hucks suggests, I conducted an interdisciplinary study by consulting resources for women's and gender studies, Africana studies, and rhetorical analysis to add depth to my research.

Hucks's findings are consistent over the time periods she researched—"the religious worlds of African American women" are amorphous, personal, and complicated and "the field of

---

[50] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters*, 281.
[51] Tracey E. Hucks, "'Burning with a Flame in America': African American Women in African-Derived Traditions," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (2001), 90.
[52] Hucks, 90.

black religious studies will need to expand its interpretations, language, categories, and analytical frameworks" to adapt to the ways African American women find religious meaning and "maintain the integrity of their individual faith traditions."[53] An investigation of their autobiographies shows that Baker and Foote experienced their religious worlds in ways that were unstructured while their conversion and sanctification experiences were deeply personal and clear. They have "been active agents in shaping their own religious meaning"[54] and publicly proclaiming their rightful place as preachers while persevering based on their unwavering trust in God's call and their resolute commitment to ministries that point to a higher power. This is consistent with Hucks's conclusion that "African American women create coherent religious realities that privilege their temporal needs and expand their spiritual possibilities."[55]

In Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's article "'My Mother's God is Mine': Finally the Most Powerful Recognition of the Importance of Women to African American Religion," the author begins with the story of how Roberta Martin, who was an early innovator of Gospel music, was deeply influenced by her mother's faith. Gilkes explains that one of Martin's early songs reflected that, as a child, her mother was her "first and frequent evangelist, persuading her to seek God."[56] Gilkes aptly emphasizes:

> If we take seriously the power of mothers in African American religious history, not just Roberta Martin's mother, but all of the praying and singing and teaching mothers and othermothers who appear throughout slave narratives and autobiographies, then we may need to re-imagine the entire span of African American religious history with women at the center.[57]

---

[53] Hucks, 105.
[54] Hucks, 90.
[55] Hucks, 106.
[56] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'My Mother's God is Mine': Finally the Most Powerful Recognition of the Importance of Women to African American Religion," *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 3 (2011), 362.
[57] Gilkes, 362.

Gilkes drives home her point about looking at African American religious history with a lens focused on women as she reflects on writings by W. E. B. Du Bois and Bettye Collier-Thomas that make the same point. Of Collier-Thomas's *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*, Gilkes writes, "This comprehensive narrative history proves that African American women are everywhere in the African American religious experience and their presence matters for black communities and the world."[58] She also describes how Du Bois, in *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*, explicated the humility and personal contact African American women brought to bear on their work to uplift the lowly. Gilkes points out that, "Du Bois devoted an entire chapter to the role of African American women as a liberating force for all women and as agents of racial reconciliation."[59] The two women I studied were a liberating force for other women of their time and others to follow although that was not an intentional aim of their ministries. Their persistence in living out God's call despite restrictions imposed based on the gender norms of the day was revolutionary. Gilkes's contributions to my research are both her emphasis on the importance of women in all aspects of African American religion and the illumination of their underrepresentation in scholarship.

Judith Weisenfeld, in her article "Invisible Women: On Women and Gender in the Study of African American Religious History," argues that "mobilizing African American women's religious history and placing it at the center of our historical inquiry"[60] provides an opportunity to question the status quo of African American religious history narratives. She contends that narratives are often accepted as fact even when they are incomplete or biased, as when women

[58] Gilkes, 363.
[59] Gilkes, 362.
[60] Weisenfeld, 133.

are not represented, or are misrepresented, in any given historical narrative. Weisenfeld suggests "ways in which examining African American women's religious experiences might open up rich areas for research and new ways of conceiving the very shape of the field."[61] She stresses that we should not overly rely on assumptions related to either religious belief or expression of culture being "self-evident" or inevitable. "Instead, we [should] attend to the specificity of local contexts and particular religious expressions as well as to routes of cultural connection and processes of rupture and transformation."[62]

Although the two women I studied were never enslaved, they were removed from slavery by as little as one generation so the cultural context of enslaved women, along with the associated "processes of rupture and transformation" as labelled by Weisenfeld, are important to the foundation of my study. In Brenda Stevenson's article, "'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down': Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South" I found this context. Stevenson builds on the foundation that within African American Christianity, women had distinctive experiences arising from institutional patriarchy and women's assigned roles in the family and community. Women, enslaved and free, have traditionally been responsible for childcare and maintaining the family's place in, and connection to, their communities. Women were also responsible for the religious upbringing of their children and, for enslaved women, the responsibility for child rearing also included the grievous duty of acculturating their children to a life of enslavement. As such, "[the] religiosity of mothers, female kin, and other influential female figures [provided them with] tools—coping strategies—to help their offspring find some peace in a life otherwise dominated by fear, unpredictability, and brutal exploitation."[63] A

[61] Weisenfeld, 133.
[62] Weisenfeld, 134.
[63] Brenda E. Stevenson, "'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down': Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South," *The Journal of African American History* 70, no. 4 (Fall 2005), 354.

primary example is the religiosity enslaved women passed on through both teaching and modeling their faith. Stevenson relates several examples of women singing, shouting, and praying while laboring in fields or after being beaten; these actions borne from their all-consuming faith demonstrated a way to rise above worldly circumstances. Their children relate witnessing this behavior and overhearing elder women talking about their faith and the comfort God provided for them which encouraged the children to embrace faith for themselves.[64] This illuminates the unique depth of meaning for religion in the lives of enslaved women or free women descended from slaves: they nurtured their personal and close relationship with God while ensuring the same for their families and communities by sharing their faith. Yet although they were expected to be faith leaders in the social sense of rearing their own children and for others in the community, they were denied the opportunity to hold leadership roles, such as preaching, that addressed all members of the community, including men. The masculine dominance that denied women of color these opportunities was present for white women as well, such as their petitions for ordination being denied;[65] however, because of their race, women of color were further subjugated.

African American Methodist Tradition in the Nineteenth Century

Baker and Foote were members of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion denominations, respectively, hence it is important to understand the history of these denominations and how their precepts and power structures affected Baker's and Foote's efforts to honor God's call on their lives.

---

[64] Stevenson, 354-355.

[65] Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 13.

From the late eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century, the Methodist Episcopal Church, a predominantly white denomination, was the fastest growing in terms of Black membership; this was largely due to the antislavery views of some of its preachers, the acts of many white members freeing their slaves, and its support of educating Black children.[66] The denomination's belief in sanctification and holiness, which required conversion, was particularly important to Black women because it was a "powerful validation of their personhood."[67] Conversion was also sometimes a dramatic and emotional event which appealed to Black Christians' "African-derived sensibilities about spirituality and expressive worship."[68] Despite its doctrinal and theological appeal to Black members, however, racism remained commonplace in the Methodist Episcopal Church with white members often denigrating Black members even during worship services, and there were members who still enslaved Black human beings as chattel. It is also noteworthy that, although John Wesley, a founder of Methodism, supported women as preachers in England, "Methodists in America were less tolerant of women preaching… [and] in eighteenth-century America, women preachers encountered scorn, rejection, and abuse from church and society alike."[69]

"Like the 'invisible institution' within slavery, northern black Christian denominations emerged as a protest against mistreatment, an affirmation of their faith, and a desire to worship in a manner that best expressed their devotion to God."[70] Following protests of their treatment at white Methodist Episcopal churches in the late eighteenth century, Black Christians formed an

---

[66] Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 17-20.
[67] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus*, 18-19.
[68] Jualynne E. Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 9.
[69] Giver-Johnston, 89.
[70] Bailey, 54.

African Methodist movement in which, notably, women did much of the building up of the church by providing space in their homes, raising funds and sharing their own resources to purchase buildings, thus "[forming the] local infrastructures, which in turn constructed the denomination."[71] Unfortunately, Black churches retained at least one characteristic that closely resembled white churches and that was male dominance; this, ironically, impinged on the free will of Black women who felt called to preach, thus subjecting them to the same oppression the Black men had sought to overcome by establishing unique African American denominations.

AME and AME Zion were the two Black Methodist denominations that formalized their independent structures earliest with incorporation in 1816 and 1820, respectively. Although there were many similarities in the backgrounds of these two denominations, there were also considerable differences, eventually including differences in their views on the roles of women, and AME Zion was more progressive in this regard.

Despite the prominent roles of women during the upswell of the new denominations, "[when] the AME Church was founded in 1816, it had no official place for women. Men held all offices in the three labyrinthine and overlapping structural units—the ministry, the laity, and the conferences."[72] It was the latter part of the nineteenth century before any official roles were established for women, and that was not the result of any altruistic work on the part of men but the "hard, sustained effort of women like Mary A. Prout, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Pricilla Baltimore, Amanda Berry Smith, and Sara Duncan."[73] (Some of these women were among the original founders of the denomination and others had contributed substantially through their ministries in later decades.) The first positions established for women were stewardess, female

[71] Dodson, 12.
[72] Dodson, 2.
[73] Dodson, 3.

evangelist, and deaconess which, by name as well as vested authority, were differentiated from the same roles for men, and it was a long, hard-fought battle to carve out even these limited positions. Although limited, these roles were essential to the existence of the church, but that did not placate women such as Baker who were certain of the validity of their experiences of God's call to preach. Unfortunately, Methodist doctrine prescribed ordination as a prerequisite for ministry, and women, at that time, were "strictly prohibited from ordination and by extension, the ministry."[74] Female members of the AME Church who felt called by God, nonetheless, "refused to allow human prohibitions to deter them from responding to those divine instructions,"[75] and they responded by becoming traveling preachers despite being unsanctioned. Although the AME Church approved licensing women as female evangelists in 1884, it prohibited their ordination to preach as well as their appointment as church pastors.[76] It was 1948 before the AME denomination conceded to ordain women as local deacons and 1960 before they were permitted full clergy rights.[77]

The AME Zion Church had a similar start and was officially incorporated in 1820. One striking difference was its timeline to the ordination of women; in the AME Church, "women were afforded some privileges, but in the nineteenth century the only church to grant suffrage, full clergy rights, and equal rights in the polity to women was the AME Zion denomination."[78] However, this was not until very late in the nineteenth century, after Foote had been an unsanctioned, itinerant preacher for over fifty years.

---

[74] Dodson, 19.
[75] Dodson, 55.
[76] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus*, 89.
[77] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus*, 90.
[78] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus*, 67.

One reason both denominations delayed ordination of women was the way it would potentially vest women with power over men either in a supervisory capacity or at the judicial level deciding cases within the church.[79] However, "antebellum black women preachers were more concerned with the right to preach than with formal ordination."[80] As previously established, they were not primarily focused on attaining power within the church; rather, they had no other choice but to follow God's compelling summons to preach.[81] Although being formally authorized to preach would have been preferable, they were not going to allow men's rules to interfere with their commitment to fulfill God's divine call.

[79] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus*, 71.
[80] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus*, 83.
[81] Giver-Johnston, 7.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

The writers of each of my secondary sources made profound contributions to the field of religious studies and provided insights for my own research; however, there are naturally gaps within and between the topics they covered. Taken together, they create a picture of the environment in which the women of my study lived, served, and challenged the obstacles set before them, which was an essential foundation enabling me to pursue my own research objective. With this foundation in place, I then considered the primary sources I would use; seeing it was through their autobiographies that Baker and Foote proclaimed their spiritual authority to preach, I decided autobiographies best suited my purposes. By chronicling their life stories, they shared their histories while also witnessing to their religious experiences of conversion, sanctification, and call; "… the discursive autobiographical form was particularly suited to, and a logical extension of, these women's vocation to preach, teach, pray publicly, and testify."[82] [83]

While investigating the sufficiency of autobiographies as primary sources, I consulted scholarly works on autobiographical accounts as a genre. Autobiographies are commonly used as primary sources for research and an observation by James Olney in *Metaphors of Self* provides one reason: although autobiography typically focuses on specific places, times, and people, it is also universal, timeless, and poetic.[84] Olney contends that autobiography is "on the one hand psychological-philosophical [and] on the other hand moral; it is focused in one direction on the

---

[82] Sue E. Houchins, "Introduction," in *Spiritual Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxx.

[83] The "women" referenced in this quote were Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Julia A. J. Foote, and Virginia W. Broughton. Although the text did not include Harriet A. Baker, she was a contemporary of these women and similarly pursued the publication of her life story to proclaim her authority to preach.

[84] James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), viii.

relation traceable between lived experience and its written record and in the other direction on what that written record offers to us as readers and as human beings."[85] I argue that what the written record offers to us as readers and human beings is a bridge to the lived experience recorded and, thereby, to the authors' humanity. This is true regardless of the gender of the author but especially powerful for women so often denied a voice. Thus, I was reassured of the sufficiency of my primary sources for the purposes of my study.

In the case of my research, Foote's writing is a traditional autobiography in which she was the sole contributor and author; however, the document I use as Baker's autobiography may more accurately be referred to as a "collaborative life writing." This term, used by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, "indicates the production of autobiographical text by more than one person through one [of a number of] processes [including] the as-told-to narrative in which an informant tells an interviewer the story of his or her life."[86] The authors point out a weakness of this form that "[in] collaborations, despite assurances of coproduction, power relations between the teller and recorder/editor are often asymmetrical, with the literarily skilled editor controlling the disposition of the informant's narrative material."[87] This could certainly be the case with the writer, John H. Acornley, being a white man and the teller, Baker, being a Black woman in post-Civil War America; however, Acornley was a fellow Christian and pastor whom Baker chose to document her life story. This indicates a level of trust between the two, both in terms of her trust in him to relay her story and his belief in the veracity of her account, thus indicating a mutuality to their relationship beyond the project of writing her account. Additionally, in his preface to his telling of Baker's story,

---

[85] Olney, x-xi.
[86] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 264-265.
[87] Smith and Watson, 265.

Acornley is clear that this is a "brief account of her life, experience and work" and the only additional motive he reveals is a desire that the text may result in "the number of Zion's travelers [being] augmented"[88] which would likely be a result Baker, as a known evangelist, desired as well. A salient point Phillippe Lejeune makes for this form of autobiography, which he calls heterobiography, is that by listening, questioning, recording and ultimately composing the text, the writer frees the subject from "the restraints related to written communication, [she] can let [her] memory take over."[89] Thus I am confident in the atypical form of autobiography I have used in the case of Baker.

Building on the examples in Collier-Thomas's and Giver-Johnston's texts, I conducted an in-depth review of the Baker's and Foote's autobiographies published in post-Civil War America to examine the effect of their race and gender on their lives and ministries, as well as their response of claiming spiritual authority. This provided depth to the analysis of the individual women and the time in which they lived revealing the commonalities and differences between the ways they publicly declared their callings and ministries, as well as providing examples for others to follow.

Autobiography of Harriet A. Baker

Baker's autobiography was recorded in 1892 by Rev. John H. Acornley in *The Colored Lady Evangelist: Being the Life, Labors, and Experiences of Mrs. Harriet A. Baker.* Baker requested that Acornley prepare the autobiography at her telling because, other than reading scripture, she was encumbered by illiteracy most of her life. Although having her life story recorded by a man may seem counter to her purpose of drawing attention to the problems of

[88] John H. Acornley, *The Colored Lady Evangelist: Being the Life, Labors and Experiences of Mrs. Harriet A. Baker* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 5.
[89] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 188-189.

male dominance in the church, Acornley captured her stories clearly and without expressing his own opinions. Their mutual respect no doubt created a level of trust necessary for such a task.

Most of the text is Acornley's retelling of details and accounts Baker shared with him, peppered with his own occasional commentary on the spiritual significance of certain stories and the lessons readers should take away; however, Acornley recorded several consequential experiences, such as Baker's conversion account, by quoting her directly. These passages, told in her own words, provide the framework of the case she built for her claim of the spiritual authority to preach. Hence, I have placed particular emphasis on the passages presented in Baker's own words and the rhetorical devices she employed. Although it is unclear whether Baker had heard of the autobiographies of other Black women preachers prior to arranging her own, the very act of requesting Acornley prepare the document is a rhetorical strategy. She wanted to ensure her story was well-documented and it is even possible that she decided which passages would be in her own words.

Harriet Ann Baker (née Cole) was born in Havre de Grace, Harford County, Maryland in 1829.[90] She was the daughter of William and Harriet Cole, about whose ancestry Acornley retells the more impactful details. On her maternal side, Harriet's great-grandmother "was an Indian squaw, who was married to an Englishman."[91] Their daughter, Harriet's maternal grandmother, married a native of Guinea, and their daughter was Harriet's mother.[92] On her paternal side, Harriet's grandmother was a house slave who married a man of the surname Cole. (It is unclear whether he was also enslaved because his name is the only detail provided; this is significant because it is here that Baker describes familial detail that was likely the most influential in her

[90] Acornley, 8.
[91] Acornley, 8.
[92] Acornley, 8.

own persistence and resourcefulness and she focuses her attention on her female ancestry.) As related by Acornley, Harriet's paternal grandmother "was gentle, tractable, reliable, and industrious, when allowed to perform her duties in peace, and not subjected to the indignity of the whipping post," but she was high-spirited and not the least bit submissive.[93] He recounts a story Baker shared of a particularly violent encounter where her grandmother was brutally beaten and violently attacked which "roused the tiger spirit of rebellion within her" and, although on the brink of death herself, she beat her mistress and, in a blind rage, killed her master.[94] "The case was of such a revolting nature that the citizens took it in hand, and interested themselves in her behalf."[95] Harriet's grandmother was so seriously injured that when she was arrested and taken into court, she was carried in on a couch; she was ultimately "acquitted and granted her freedom."[96] It was during her time in jail awaiting her trial that she gave birth to Harriet's father, William. This history of Harriet's ancestry demonstrates Baker's awareness of, and connection to, the dichotomy of a more privileged life on her maternal side against a violent life of enslavement on her paternal side. She was fully aware of the obstacles she would face as a Black woman, and her kinship with those from whom she came naturally influenced the essence of who she became.

One of Harriet's earliest hardships, her father's death, was recounted in Baker's own words; it was a pivotal experience in her early life. Although she was born free, upon the death of her father a local slaveholder came to take away any children old enough to work, and sell them into slavery, as was the custom; Harriet was eleven years old at the time. It was the law that the

[93] Acornley, 8.
[94] Acornley, 9.
[95] Acornley, 9-10.
[96] Acornley, 10.

children could not be taken if sufficient food and clothing were in the home, which was the case for Harriet's family. She explains, "some of the friends my father worked for, (though they were slaveholders) pitied us, and sent us five bushels of corn, three bushels of wheat, and some meat every winter,"[97] and the older children worked to provide for the family. In this way she avoided being taken into slavery. To further protect Harriet from being captured and enslaved, her mother hired her out to Mr. and Mrs. Bailey; she stayed there a long time and the couple, having no children, treated her as their own, providing her with silk dresses. Of this, Harriet said, "…I tell you, I used to feel big."[98] Not only had she avoided being enslaved; to the contrary, she was living a life where she was wanted in an emotional sense—as a surrogate daughter—and afforded the finer things in life. This is juxtaposed against what she knew, from her grandmother's life, about the realities of slavery and she credited her mother saying, "God blessed me with a good wise mother" who hired Harriet out to the Baileys where she "stayed a long while… [and] had it very pleasant."[99]

At the age of twelve or thirteen, Harriet experienced conversion. Baker's account of her conversion experience, told in her own words, builds from her idealistic pre-conversion life with the Baileys to a crescendo at the moment of her conversion, illuminating the weightiness of accepting Jesus with all that entailed. She begins her narration of the experience by describing Mr. Bailey teaching her to dance and the grand balls he would host for all the children from wealthy families; Harriet delighted in attending these balls. She tells her conversion story in a way that contrasts the light and liveliness of those occasions against the weightiness that surrounded the event where her conversion occurred.

---

[97] Acornley, 12.
[98] Acornley, 13.
[99] Acornley, 13.

One day, Harriet's mother invited her to attend a "band-meeting" with her and, assuming there would be a band and dancing, Harriet eagerly agreed. She wore her best dress and jewelry thinking "it must be something grand, or mother would not ask me to go with her."[100] Baker provides vivid details of the day beginning with traveling to the "other side of town" plus five miles farther and arriving at a farm that was abandoned "except [for] a colored family, who were there to watch the place."[101] She made it clear that this was not living up to her expectations for the event. The log cabin had a dirt floor and sparse, timeworn furnishings, and Harriet, waiting for the band, "could not see… how they were going to get along in such a place."[102] In this she draws a distinct, visual juxtaposition between her fine attire and the desolate place she had entered. She was confused when about sixteen women entered the room and proceeded to lock and bar the door. Then reality crashed down on her when the meeting began which she explains saying, "Then you may depend I was cross with myself to think I had only come to a prayer-meeting."[103] As the singing and praying continued, it became ever more hot in the room, and Harriet grew increasingly worried about ruining her dress. She refused to kneel in the dirt to pray and asked her mother to let her leave, but her mother ignored her. Harriet moved to the side, leaning on a fireplace, and steadying herself by holding onto a gap where a brick was missing. In that moment, she felt the power of God strike her down and she found herself in a pit where nobody could reach her; she cried out to Jesus to help her although she did not know who or where he was, she was merely mimicking what she had heard her mother do, and she trusted Jesus would save her from her fall. Suddenly she saw a bright, glorious light and felt "the

[100] Acornley, 29-30.
[101] Acornley, 30.
[102] Acornley, 30.
[103] Acornley 30.

sweetest of peace."[104] She was still reaching out to free herself and called out, again, with all her strength for Jesus to save her. This narrative is punctuated by Baker's statement, "Now I want to tell you that if I had known anything about God or his Word it would have been quite different, but I did not. I had only heard my mother, and some other old women talking, and praying to Jesus. But that night, praise God! He saved my soul, and I praise God continually for his goodness and mercy to me from that time to the present."[105] She makes it clear that the experience changed her permanently and set her on a distinct path. Through Baker's juxtapositions, the imagery of a dark pit contrasted by a bright light, along with her confusion giving way to certainty, she creates a captivating account of her conversion. The reader may or may not believe her account, but there is no doubt that Harriet believed, and the experience was powerful; so much so, that it fueled her call and response, which occurred later after she was married and had children, demonstrating the lasting result.

Harriet married William Baker, a slave, in 1845, at the age of seventeen. Her husband's owner consented to the marriage hoping to secure her services at a low rate, and he arranged a marriage announcement to appear in the local newspaper. Of this, Baker said, "It did make me feel quite big to see my name in the paper…"[106] Two years later, though, her husband's owner planned to sell him to a slave trader in Georgia, so Harriet and her husband fled to Pennsylvania where they would be free. She tells of her excitement over the first money they earned there where jobs were more plentiful and the wages were higher, but then learning that things were more expensive than she expected. Harriet convinced her husband that they should save their money to buy property, which they eventually did and even built a home of their own in 1848

[104] Acornley, 31.
[105] Acornley, 32.
[106] Acornley, 15.

with the help of many friends. This is another story told in Baker's own words and she emphasizes that she guided them in their priorities saying, "He agreed to everything I said."[107]All their debt was paid off in three years, and they lived a frugal and pragmatic life, handling hardships as they came which included losing their house to fire twice and her husband being captured and temporarily enslaved again by his former slaveholder after the passage of the fugitive slave bill in 1850. Harriet continued to be resourceful in facing the challenges that arose in their lives.

Despite her earlier conversion and her conviction that God had a plan for her life, Harriet was no stranger to adversity. The constant threat of being enslaved and the continuous oppression of Black persons kept her ever aware of society's judgement that she was "less than." This is underscored by her relating the times that she "felt big" which were in stark contrast to the more persistent feeling of being insignificant, or small. Even feeling big, however, was dwarfed by her sense of belonging to God which explains her absolute commitment to God's call. Nonetheless, as Acornley describes, Harriet hesitated and wrestled with God. "The work appeared so fearfully momentous, and she realizing her own weakness, cast herself before the Lord in humble supplication and prayer."[108] Ultimately, "God opened her way, and in a wonderful manner directed her steps."[109]

Even with God's intervention, Harriet met with stark opposition from her pastor, members of her church, her friends, and even her husband. Their common rationale was that God did not intend women to preach. Here we move from a place of racial oppression to one of gender exclusion, both of which were common at that time. Harriet acquiesced to the opposition

[107] Acornley, 19.
[108] Acornley, 33.
[109] Acornley, 34.

initially and, after enduring the deaths of two of her daughters, she fell into her own severe illness, but then she began to pray in earnest and God completely restored her health. "The opposition to her entering upon evangelistic work was still not subdued, preacher and people, husband and children, her best and dearest friends, acted as though they were combined to stop her from going, but she was so sure of her Divine commission that she held fast to her purpose."[110] After additional prayer and personal encounters with God with startling results visible to all, including something akin to an earthquake, the universal cry from all objectors was, "…'loose the woman, and let her go.' Thus, the Lord brought her out with a strong hand and a mighty arm, and in a short time afterwards she was enabled to enter upon her mission."[111]

In 1872, Harriet began traveling to lead camp-meetings and preach wherever she went; she preached without any human authority since the church maintained its opposition to female evangelists and did not license her to preach until two years later. Eventually, church leaders saw that she was being welcomed in white churches and, through her preaching, sinners were being converted and believers edified; thus, their intolerance gradually abated, "and the way was made clear for her to labor among the churches of her own people."[112] She worked alongside many male preachers and, eventually, her work was endorsed by several bishops of the AME Church.

Harriet was never formally ordained by the Church, but in 1889, the Philadelphia AME Conference appointed her to "take charge" of St. Paul's Church in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. This was not the magnanimous gesture it appeared to be, however, because she found the church to have very low membership and overwhelming debt; likely, no male clergy would accept the appointment. All told, Harriet labored in ministry for eighteen years as of Acornley's preparation

[110] Acornley, 37.
[111] Acornley, 40.
[112] Acornley, 43.

of her life story, and she persisted even beyond this continually widening her sphere of influence in proclaiming the gospel. In this way she was an early leader in the struggle for women's ordination in the AME church and, more importantly, remained true to her conviction to honor God's call for her to preach.

Autobiography of Julia A. J. Foote

Foote begins the preface to her autobiography, written in 1879, by sharing her mindset about the endeavor, "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."[113] This explanation is multifaceted in that she is both describing her own inclination to write it—she had been considering doing so for a long time—and she is also clearly proclaiming, from the outset, that her ultimate obedience is to God; thus, she prayed about it before proceeding. In her preface she also lays out the basis of her argument for her spiritual authority to preach: she testifies to "the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus Christ to save all from sin" and she asserts that those who are in Christ "cannot reject those whom he has received."[114] She further declares an evangelistic purpose wishing that many—"especially of [her] own race"—will become believers, thus ultimately entering into the "sweet soul rest" available to believers.[115] Foote is not being irresolute in having dual purposes for creating her autobiography; rather, she is testifying to her faith in God both to bring other souls along in the faith and to defend her own spiritual authority as bestowed by God. She chronicles her story to provide evidence of this divine authority.

---

[113] Julia A. J. Foote, "A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch," in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 163.
[114] Foote, 163.
[115] Foote, 163.

Julia (birth surname is unknown) was born in 1823 in Schenectady, NY to parents who had been enslaved as children through early adulthood before buying their freedom.[116] They had each endured many hardships in slavery including beatings, exposure to the elements, and being sold and relocated at the whim of their slaveholders and, although that ended before Julia was born, she was impacted by the generational memory of it. Even after their time of enslavement ended, her parents continued to be subjected to harassment due to their race. They had professed their faith and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, but "[they] were not treated as Christian believers, but as poor lepers" relegated to a corner of the church and prevented from taking communion until all the white members, rich and poor, had been served.[117] This deeply distressed Julia as she recognized it as a "fruit of slavery" that whites, despite their own professions of faith or their relative wealth, considered themselves to be "holier than thou" in relation to Black members of the same church and faith.[118] This is significant because wealth was a primary consideration in social standing, yet whites made it clear that even the poorest among them had much higher standing than anyone with dark skin. It was engrained in Julia at a young age that the color of her skin would be an obstacle in her life among whites.

Julia was surrounded by religion from an early age. One of her earliest memories of a religious nature was when she was about eight years old. There had been a "big meeting" at her parent's church after which two ministers visited their home. One, who had an impressive countenance with long gray hair and beard, placed his hand on Julia's head and asked if she prayed. She dropped to her knees and began praying "the only prayer she knew, 'Now I lay me down to sleep.'"[119] He stood her up and prayed over her at length and then instructed her to "be a

[116] Foote, 166.
[117] Foote 167.
[118] Foote, 167.
[119] Foote, 169.

good girl and pray."[120] She was struck with fear because she thought this man was the Lord and that she would surely die. Foote shares, "After they had gone, my mother talked with me about my soul more than she ever had before, and told me that this preacher was a good man, but not the Lord."[121] Julia's mother assured her that if she behaved well and said her prayers, she would have a place in heaven. Not long after this, a white woman taught her the Lord's prayer, and upon learning to repeat the prayer on her own, joy filled her heart. Foote explains, "It has always seemed to me that I was converted at this time."[122]

Soon after this, Julia, delighting in the family worship her father led weekly, discovered a yearning to learn to read the Bible. Her father was the only member of the family who could read at all and, although he could only barely read, he taught Julia the alphabet. Despite her delight at learning the alphabet and how to pray "properly," she felt she was beginning to backslide—not praying nearly as often as she once had—and she recognized the gift of having Christian parents to teach her.

When Julia was ten years old, her parents sent her to live with the Prime family in the country. They had no children of their own and they grew fond of Julia and treated her kindly; she felt loved by Mrs. Prime.[123] Mrs. Prime was crippled and her brother, Mr. John, was dying of consumption. Mr. John lived with his father, which was not far away, so he was able to walk to the Prime's house. It brought Julia to tears to watch him struggling to make his way across the fields and she became concerned about whether he prayed. She asked him and he responded that he did sometimes, but he asked Julia to pray for him. She prayed for him earnestly as long as he

[120] Foote, 169.
[121] Foote, 169.
[122] Foote, 169.
[123] Foote, 171.

lived, asking God to send "that good man to put his hand on Mr. John's head."[124] After Mr. John died, Julia heard people saying "he died very happy, and had gone to heaven," and she was certain "the good man had been there and laid his hand on his head."[125] Julia was remembering the minister who had placed his hand on her head, and she understood the significance of praying for someone in this way. This impressed upon her the importance of witnessing for Christ to save another's soul. This was likely Julia's first taste of caring for the soul of another.

The Primes treated Julia as if she were their own and sent her to school where she quickly learned to spell to serve her strong desire to read the Bible; however, her happy life with them became scarred by an incident wherein Mrs. Prime believed Julia had stolen cakes and beat her for it. Julia was sure it was a boy who worked for Mr. Prime who had stolen the cakes, but she did not have proof, so she said nothing other than denying that she had done anything wrong. Julia ran away and went back to her home to tell her mother what had happened. Mr. and Mrs. Prime came and retrieved her after a lengthy conversation with her mother; they had promised not to whip her again, but what Julia did not know until years later was that her mother had defended Julia's honestly and "talked very sharply to the Primes" when she was out of earshot.[126] After her return, the Primes treated her as kindly as before, but she did not see it that way and felt she had become a "hardened sinner."[127] She left when she was twelve years old and returned to her home where she cared for her younger siblings while her mother worked.

Soon after this, Julia's parents moved the family to Albany where they joined the African Methodist Church and regularly attended services along with the children. It was then when Julia first began to truly understand religion and see its beauty; she "resolved to serve God whatever

[124] Foote, 171.
[125] Foote, 171.
[126] Foote, 176.
[127] Foote, 176.

might happen."[128] Her resolve was soon broken, however, when she became entranced with the world's idle pleasures and Foote describes the tension of that time saying, "I bartered the things of the kingdom for the fooleries of the world."[129] Still, Julia felt God's presence and never fully shook the heaviness of being a sinner.

Although Julia thought herself to be converted at the age of eight after her encounter with the gray-haired man who placed his hand upon her head and prayed for her, Foote's autobiography includes a chapter about her conversion that happened when she was fifteen years old. Julia was at a Sunday-evening church meeting when "the minister preached from the text: 'And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts and the elders, and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand which were redeemed from earth.' Rev. xiv. 3."[130] Being internally convicted of her own sinfulness, she collapsed and had to be carried home where she remained unconscious for twenty hours. During that time, she had visions of a tormentor following her "saying, 'Such a sinner as you are can never sing that new song'," and fearing God she "cried, 'Lord, have mercy on me, a poor sinner!'"[131] The tormentor was silenced and "a ray of light flashed across [her] eyes, accompanied by a sound of far distant singing; the light grew brighter and brighter, and the singing more distinct."[132] The words she heard were "'This is the new song—redeemed, redeemed!'"[133] Julia's heart filled with joy and peace and she saw that she had been "saved from eternal burning."[134]

---

[128] Foote, 177.
[129] Foote, 177.
[130] Foote, 180.
[131] Foote, 180.
[132] Foote, 180.
[133] Foote, 180.
[134] Foote, 180.

After this, Julia was "filled with rapture too deep for words," and recognized that, having been saved, she was "a brand plucked from the burning."[135] She went to her friends and told them how Christ had saved her, but they mocked her. Although she declared she was a changed person and had been taught a new song, she began to doubt the veracity of her experience thinking that true conversion only happened at the altar under the prayer of the minister. Shortly thereafter, though, the minister came to visit and reassured her saying, "'My child, it is not the altar nor the minister that saves souls, but faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for all men.'"[136] He read from the Bible about grace through faith being the source of saving and Julia "believed it with all [her] heart." Foote closes the chapter declaring, "There is great peace in believing. Glory to the Lamb!"[137] It is interesting to note that, regarding conversion, the minister was wholeheartedly supportive—in contrast to what Julia would experience when her conversion later led to a call to preach.

Julia struggled long with her own sinfulness as well as her strong desire to be better educated. She felt she needed to be educated to fully understand what God said she needed in order to truly believe and shed her sinful nature. Because of her race, though, a formal education was beyond her grasp whether outwardly prohibited or covertly deterred. As she continued to vacillate between faith and doubt, salvation and sin, Julia struggled to find her way and in due course she encountered an old man and his wife who spoke at the church about the struggles they had faced controlling their own tempers and pride among other shortcomings. They told about leaning on Jesus "believing his blood could wash them clean and sanctify them wholly to himself" and the sweet peace they had found as a result.[138] After this encounter, Julia became

[135] Foote, 181.
[136] Foote, 181.
[137] Foote, 181.
[138] Foote, 185.

singularly focused on obtaining sanctification, but she was admonished by her parents and minister, among others, that sanctification was not for the young. Thus, the obstacles she encountered expanded to include her age. Julia continued to pray for sanctification and the day came when she received the full assurance of glory; after telling her parents and others, some believed while others still did not. Nonetheless, Julia had found "that sweet peace that passeth all understanding springing up within [her] soul like a perennial fountain—[declaring] glory to the precious blood of Jesus!"[139]

It was after she was married and had moved far away from her family that Julia first discerned a call from God to preach. She had long felt moved to pray with the people and encourage them in their faith, and "in meetings, [her] whole soul seemed drawn out for the salvation of souls," but she did not believe she could be called to preach.[140] Still, the impressions and visions persisted to instill in her the idea that she would never be at peace until she accepted God's call to preach. Julia's tribulations left her ill and her husband and friends were concerned that she would end up dead or driven to insanity if something positive did not soon happen; they were not aware of the call she was struggling against. Shortly after this, Julia had a vision that left her convinced that God would not let her rest until she agreed, once and for all, to preach. Over the next several chapters, Foote shares various accounts of opposition she faced when she claimed to be called by God to preach. It is important to note, however, that it was not the risk of others' disapproval that had caused her reluctance about preaching up to this point; rather, it had been her self-doubts, and her own former attitude about women preaching. Foote acknowledges

[139] Foote, 187.
[140] Foote, 200.

that she had opposed women preaching and had even spoken publicly about her opposition, although she realized this opinion was unfounded.[141]

Just as Foote repeats the stories of sinfulness and dismay contrasted with the times of sureness in salvation and sanctification, she repeats the verse "a brand plucked from the fire"—also the title of her autobiography. She uses repetition to drive home the point that Jesus had rescued her from sin, and this was the driving force in her absolute commitment to finding a way to witness through her preaching. Her times of doubt were always followed by assurances from God.

Julia's pastor at the time was her first and most stalwart antagonist who instigated efforts to prevent her from preaching. Certain members of the church, however, were supportive and opened their homes for her to preach there. Not only did the minister, along with the church trustees, block Julia from preaching in the church; they also attempted to obstruct her ability to preach anywhere. The minister went so far as lying telling others that he said she could preach in the church, just not from the pulpit; however, he never permitted her to preach anywhere in the church. Furthermore, when Julia said she would preach in private homes, he claimed he was "stationed over all Boston" showing his determination that she should not preach anywhere in the city.[142] In addition to this, members of the church who supported her efforts to preach were threatened with excommunication.

Julia was challenged repeatedly by her minister, and he eventually assembled a committee to hear him interrogate her and make a ruling on the case. He asked her many questions, but there was only one she remembered: that was whether she "was willing to comply with the rules of the discipline" to which she responded, "Not if the discipline prohibits me from

[141] Foote, 201.
[142] Foote, 206.

doing what God has bidden me to do; I fear God more than man."[143] Foote explains that the committee said what they had to say to her and, as she left, she used scripture to make a point saying, "'I now shake off the dust of my feet as a witness against you [Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5]. See to it that this meeting does not rise in judgment against you.'"[144] Her use of scripture to make her point is a suitable device as it is the source her persecutors professed to be the basis of their religion. The next day a member of the committee informed her that she was "no longer a member of the church, because [she] had violated the rules of the discipline by preaching."[145]

Julia's persecution was not limited to the local church. Considering herself a member of the Conference, she wrote a letter to them to argue her case and request an impartial hearing saying her only transgression was "in trying to preach the Gospel of Christ."[146] Foote describes the response to her letter saying it was barely noticed, and then "thrown under the table."[147] She goes on to express her frustration saying, "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."[148]

Despite her hesitance in the early days of her calling, this pervasive opposition drew Julia out and pushed her forward in claiming her right to preach. She saw her trials reflected in biblical passages noting, "Fiery trials are not strange things to the Lord's anointed."[149] In response to a statement that a woman claiming to be called to preach "will be believed when she shows credentials from heaven; that is, when she works a miracle," Julia points out the duplicity of the

[143] Foote, 206.
[144] Foote, 206.
[145] Foote, 206.
[146] Foote, 207.
[147] Foote, 207.
[148] Foote, 207.
[149] Foote, 210.

statement by making the same demand of her male counterparts.[150] She then goes on to quote scripture to support her case of the equality of men and women in God's eyes: "'There is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus' [Gal. 3:28]. Philip had four daughters that prophesied, or preached. Paul called Priscilla, as well as Aquila, his 'helper,' or, as in the Greek, his 'fellow-laborer.'"[151] Julia further points out that women in scripture were an example to others and women in early Christianity, and throughout the ages, "were happy and glorious in martyrdom… [having] suffered persecution and death for the name of the Lord Jesus."[152]

Although Foote makes minimal references to denominational affiliation throughout her autobiography, William Andrews, in *Sisters of the Spirit*, provides suitable closure sharing that, fifteen years after the publication of Foote's autobiography, "On May 20, 1894, she became the first woman in the A.M.E. Zion church to be ordained a deacon… [and before] her death on November 22, 1900, she was ordained an elder in the church, only the second woman to hold that high office in her denomination."[153] Thus, Julia had persisted through the years to follow God's call and to rely on God to uphold her through the Holy Spirit which she had seen throughout her ministry.

[150] Foote, 209.
[151] Foote, 209.
[152] Foote, 209.
[153] Andrews, 10.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Baker's and Foote's life stories have many similarities as well as a few notable dissimilarities. The most prominent difference is that Foote authored her autobiography herself while Baker employed another author, Acornley, to mediate her story. Foote was thusly enabled to create her own narrative using nuanced language of her own choosing while Baker was subject to Acornley's interpretation of the stories she shared. Baker and Acornley shared mutual respect for one another's work and ministries, thus making him a suitable and trustworthy candidate to offer this service. As previously established, Baker was encumbered by illiteracy most of her life; therefore, choosing Acornley as her author was an effective strategy for creating an impactful account. Fortunately, Acornley reverted to quoting Baker verbatim for the more significant passages of her account, so I was able to hear those narratives in her own words.

Most of the impactful portions of their life stories were more alike than not. They were near contemporaries in age with Julia being just six years older than Harriet, and each was born free but was removed from a life of slavery by only one or two generations. Thus, they were each keenly aware of the disadvantages, hostility, and danger they would encounter as a Black person. Each girl was sent to live with, and work for, a childless white couple when she was ten or eleven years of age, and each told of feeling loved in her substitute home. Each also had times in those settings when she was reminded of how she was judged for her race or even physically abused; Harriet when friends of her hosts asked why they made such a fuss over a "colored child" and Julia when she was accused of stealing and, as a result, was beaten.

Harriet and Julia both experienced Christian conversion in their early- to mid-teenage years; those experiences were intense and had similar aspects. For example, each occurred in the setting of a religious gathering and included an episode of seeing visions of darkness and calling

to Jesus repeatedly for help. The moment of conversion was particularly similar, marked by a sensation of being saved followed by the presence of a bright light and a feeling of great peace. Their conversion experiences were life-altering for both Harriet and Julia, but each of them experienced backsliding and self-doubts in the aftermath. These were internal feelings of inadequacy which were partly from their own insecurities, but also potentially influenced by internalized racism.

Both women married in their late-teenage years and discerned God's call to preach after that time. In neither case was the call a pinnacle moment like the conversion had been, but they were nonetheless moved by God's persistence in giving them hearts for ministry. Like many biblical stories, each woman felt inadequate which emphasizes that the desire to preach was from God and not self-motivated. Christians often note that God calls the unlikely to serve and provides what they need to be successful whether that be skills, knowledge, or fortitude. In Harriet's case God made her able to read and understand scripture despite her illiteracy, and Julia was empowered by biblical passages about surviving "fiery trials" and the ways that women were called out throughout scripture.

Although they both faced objections upon announcing their intentions to preach, Harriet's church community, friends, and family were mostly unified in their remonstrations while some among Julia's community supported her efforts even making their homes available for her to preach. What was necessary, however, for the women to preach in the church was the endorsement of the church and that was not forthcoming for either of them. Each woman set off on her own to find places to preach because they could not refrain from sharing the message of Jesus' salvation and they were each successful in reaching great numbers of people, converting some and edifying others. It is noteworthy that their ministries spanned from the antebellum era

through the postbellum period, although neither Baker nor Foote made any reference to the Civil War in her account; however, they both address the treatment of Black persons, fear of capture, and similar persistent, underlying dangers related to their race.

Baker and Foote both told their life stories to demonstrate the source of their authority to preach and testified to their religious experiences. Each used repetition in her narrative to drive home key points as well as contrasting imagery of darkness and light, heaviness and peace. Both experienced continual assurances from God even in the face of their own self-doubt, and neither succumbed to the obstacles associated with being a woman; rather, they persisted and were successful in fulfilling the task to which God called them—to deliver God's message through their preaching. It was through their absolute faith in God that they persisted despite the obstacles imposed by society based on their race and gender, as well as their natural human misgivings.

CONCLUSION

Interdisciplinary Considerations

While my comparative analysis describes what I learned about Baker and Foote, two women I came to admire and whom I appreciate for having preserved their life stories, this conclusion is more of an academic exercise. Although Baker and Foote framed their quest for empowerment around both religious and secular experiences, those are deeply influenced by their race, class, and gender. Since their narratives called out race and gender most clearly, I am concluding with an analysis applying certain aspects of gender and Africana studies; disciplines that have vast implications individually and collectively.

Both Baker and Foote include accounts early in their autobiographies that relate to their connection to slavery through ancestry, as well as their personal experiences of the racialized society in which they lived. This is an essential aspect of each woman's identity, and I explore this later in my conclusion; however, the prevailing content in their narratives focuses on their highly personal religious experiences and the effect of their gender on how others responded to their efforts to live out their calls. This can be partially attributed to the fact that they were affiliated with African American religious institutions (AME and AME Zion denominations) so, despite the oppression they faced in every aspect of society as Black persons, the more pressing issue they confronted within their respective denominations was the religious oppression they faced as women in the Black church. In other words, they identify race as the foundation of their identity and describe the associated societal impact; then, with that clearly established, the bulk of their autobiographies serve as rhetorical strategies to expose the unacceptable treatment to which they were subjected as women of faith within the Black church. Autobiography is an empowering form of self-realization, reflection, and revelation with the act of telling being as

important as the stories told. Baker's and Foote's autobiographies were created to describe, as well as shape, their own identities and religious expressions in the face of these pressures.

The Black church had emerged and grown with male dominance at its center and neither the performance of religious leadership then, nor later studies of nineteenth-century African American religion, gave voice to women. Although women were essential in the foundation, growth, and preservation of the Black church, men held the primary leadership roles and were not willing to consider women worthy as official leaders. "Prominent male clergy typically developed interpretations of scripture defining women's inferiority and these were adopted, adapted, and articulated by rank-and-file ministers."[154]

As previously established, Black women preachers were held back by intersectionality[155] meaning that they were bound by at least two aspects of their identity: race and gender. These identities overlapped to situate them at the intersection of two distinct, but inextricable, areas of oppression. As women, they were seen as subordinate to men and as women of color they were seen as inferior to whites. Not only did this place them in a dyad of inequality, but it also limited their ability to be voices for either of those identities. Baker and Foote were both fully aware of this reality and, hence, they addressed both aspects of their identities in their autobiographies.

Baker and Foote describe, in detail, the actions and interactions they initiated as they argued their cases and struggled for their rights; however, it was by capturing these accounts in published form that they assured wider revelation and impact of those acts. In this way they expressed in another form—written as opposed to oratorical—their defiance and laid bare the

---

[154] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus*, 59.

[155] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: New Press, 1995), 358.

hypocrisy of the African American church that was formed to address inequities in the white church yet perpetuated the oppression of Black women. The very act of publishing their accounts defied gender roles and expectations of that time. Thus, in addition to the act of documenting their experiences, thereby illuminating the assumed gender roles for women in religion at that time, they empowered themselves to claim their agency both to preach and to publicly declare their right to do so. Baker and Foote were excluded from religious leadership and had no support from the church either in preaching or in arguing for the right to preach; however, they persisted in securing a voice by creating their own narratives and doing so in the most public ways possible—by preaching to the masses and publishing their stories.

Africana studies with its emphasis on the African diaspora has a natural connection to a study of Baker's and Foote's autobiographies and the details of the stories they contain. In his text *The Afrocentric Idea*, Molefi Kete Asante provides a "critical reevaluation of social phenomena on the basis of an Afrocentric orientation."[156] He explains "Afrocentricity" as a paradigm that speaks to agency and action.[157] I find this helpful in considering the racial perspectives Baker and Foote lived and brought to their writing. Asante's text is also helpful for recognizing my own Eurocentric perspective reminding me of the limitations of my frame of reference and, thus, my understanding.[158]

Asante proposes "three fundamental Afrocentric themes of transcendent discourse: (1) human relations; (2) humans' relationship to the supernatural; and (3) humans' relationships to

---

[156] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 12.
[157] Asante, 19.
[158] Asante delves deeply into the subject of African American discourse, asserting that much of this discourse, spoken or written, occurs within a Eurocentric context. He further elaborates that "speaking about black issues does not make a discourse Afrocentric," nor is "discourse, merely because it is uttered by a black person, *Afrocentric*." (185) Hence, I am cautious about my reference to Afrocentricity; nonetheless, certain points he makes strike me as particularly well-suited to a critique of Baker's and Foote's narratives.

their own being."[159] These themes can be seen throughout Baker's and Foote's accounts. "Human relations" speaks to the interactions Baker and Foote had with others, Black and white, throughout their lives, and particularly those to whom they are "speaking" through their writings. They are pleading their cases and proclaiming their rights to the masses as well as to those vested with the institutional power to bring about change, in this case permitting women to serve in all roles, including preaching, within the AME and AME Zion churches. Their encounters with God exemplify "humans' relationships to the supernatural" and they are clear that it is through this source that their authority to preach is founded. Perhaps the most revealing of these themes, however, is "humans' relations to their own being." Baker and Foote each tells her story from an intensely personal perspective; they describe ideologies and experiences in a way that reveals their humanity and acknowledges their doubts in themselves. Asante states the assumption that the objective of discourses such as these "is the successful presentation of one of the three principal themes, often within the context of resistance to oppression, liberation from stereotypes, and action in anticipation of reaction."[160] As stated above, I believe Baker and Foote succeeded in addressing all three of Asante's principal themes using their agency to resist oppression both in the actions they took throughout their lives and those of publishing their accounts; the latter certainly being an example of taking action in anticipation of a reaction.

I have found this interdisciplinary review particularly useful to gain an appreciation for the complexity and interwoven nature of human identity. Given my academic and professional background, I have a natural tendency to focus on distinct categories; however, I have learned this is not possible in the study of humanities. It is invaluable that studies specific to gender,

[159] Asante, 184.
[160] Asante 184-185

culture, race, etc. exist, but I am also acutely aware of the need to consider those in relationship to one another.

Contributions to the Field of Religious Studies

Through this thesis project, I invested the time to create an interdisciplinary study that provides depth and richness to my findings through the linkages between my topic and the disciplines of gender and Africana studies; thus, demonstrating the value of this broader perspective. Additionally, I have not only looked to other disciplines for what they contribute to the study of religion, I have also shown religious studies to be a discipline worthy of contributing to the other traditional categories in the study of identity. In her introduction to *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, Elizabeth Castelli describes the "complicated role that religion has played in identity formations, social relations, and power structures," explaining that religion cuts across and complicates other categories of identity rather than solidifying them into a stronger context.[161] Although, as Castelli indicates, religion complicates rather than solidifies other categories of identity, religion remains a means to understand not only one's relationship to a higher power but also to make sense of one's world. Hence, it is inextricably interwoven with our various identities which is clearly indicated in my findings.

Another way of looking at the contribution of religion, particularly as it relates to my topic, is expressed by Judith Plaskow in "The Academy as Real Life: New Participants and Paradigms in the Study of Religion" wherein she identifies academic attention to "the ways in which religious teachings, symbols, and rituals interstructure with and legitimate various forms

[161] Elizabeth A. Castelli, ed. with the assistance of Rosamond C. Rodman, *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 5.

of oppression and are also sources of resistance."[162] I have contributed to this understanding of the role religion can play in the oppression of marginalized persons by recognizing two Black women as invaluable subjects for my research and drawing out, from their autobiographies, their unique perspectives on the oppression they faced as well as how they persisted in finding ways to overcome the obstacles put in their way by the power structures of their time. These are examples of my participation in addressing a gap in the current scholarship in terms of gender analysis in the Black Church.

In terms of my primary sources, I did not limit my scope to an already well-studied woman, I was also intentional about including a lesser-known woman thus giving her voice in our time. Furthermore, I did not avoid studying Baker's life stories because they were relayed in a non-traditional form of autobiography; rather, I embraced the text created through "collaborative life writing,"[163] thereby expanding the scope of primary sources for my research. Recognizing Baker's autobiography as an atypical form, I suggested various possibilities such as whether Baker herself decided which passages should be written in her own words. Each woman's choice to publish her life stories was itself an act of defiance against gender norms, but in Baker's case I felt this was amplified by her choice to put her story in the hands of another person, particularly a man, because she recognized it was that important for the story to be told. I am confident that she assured that her story was told in a way that was true to her meaning and purpose in telling it.

The most important contribution my work brings to the study of religion is providing an example of an atypical scholar adding to the breadth of scholarship on a topic as important as

---

[162] Judith Plaskow, "The Academy as Real Life: New Participants and Paradigms in the Study of Religion," in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli with the assistance of Rosamond C. Rodman (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 540.
[163] Smith and Watson, 264-265.

this. I do not have an academic or professional background steeped in, or even particularly familiar with, the humanities; however, I have committed my time, energy, and mental capacity to doing my best to understand, and present that understanding of, the women I studied. The academic value of this scholarly contribution may be lacking, but I believe my example and encouragement for others to follow a non-traditional path is powerful.

Recommendation for Future Research

At the outset of my research, I was unaware of the impact it would have on me personally. My study of humanities, religion in particular, has opened to me new ways of thinking and being in the world. My hope is that other neophyte scholars, like me, will view this as an invitation to identify and pursue research that will not only serve as an academic undertaking but, possibly more importantly, help them to recognize how they uniquely learn and contribute to the broader collective of scholarship. They and I contribute to this broader scholarship when we chip away at what obscures our view of the issues that we find most intriguing. The contribution of any one scholar is naturally limited to their particular view, so it is through myriad views that the collective comes together and forms a more complete picture.

Certainly, I recommend using my research as a jumping off point for deeper analysis of Black women and religion in the antebellum period because, as previously established, it is an area ripe for exploration. It would be shortsighted, however, to leave it at such a narrow recommendation. Rather, I encourage budding scholars to find other areas of African American history to explore so that we may contribute to the ongoing revelation of an entire field of knowledge heretofore insufficiently explored and exposed.

As Patricia Hills Collins explains, “Social science research has ignored Black women’s actions in both the struggle for group survival and institutional transformation. In part this

neglect stems from the exclusion of Black women's experiences as a subject of serious study from both traditional scholarship and its Afrocentric and feminist critiques."[164] I believe religious studies, as a social science, can be a key contributor to interdisciplinary research addressing this imparity in scholarship by continuing to pursue serious examination centered on Black women's religious experiences. Collins shares a positive outlook on this saying, "More recent scholarship supplements [the] initial emphasis on oppression by presenting African-American women as constrained but often empowered figures."[165] I add that the extent to which they are *self*-empowered, as in the case of Harriet Baker and Julia Foote, is worthy of considerable attention.

[164] Collins, 140.
[165] Collins, 44.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Acornley, John H. *The Colored Lady Evangelist: Being the Life, Labors and Experiences of Mrs. Harriet A. Baker*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016. (Previously published by Garland Publishing, 1892).

Foote, Julia A. J. "A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch." In *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, edited by William L. Andrews, 161-234. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Secondary Sources

Andrews, William L., ed. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Asante, Molefi Kete. *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.

Bailey, Julius H. *Down in the Valley: An Introduction to African American Religious History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016.

Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Blakemore, Erin. "The Origins of African American Studies, Explained." In *National Geographic*, February 13, 2023. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/african-american-black-studies-origins-explained.

Castelli, Elizabeth A., ed. with the assistance of Rosamond C. Rodman. *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785-810. https://www.jstor.com/stable/10.1086/669608.

Collier-Thomas, Bettye. *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

Collier-Thomas, Bettye. *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” In *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, edited by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, 357-383. New York: New Press, 1995.

Dodson, Jualynne E. *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

Douglass-Chin, Richard J. *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.

Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. “‘My Mother’s God is Mine’: Finally the Most Powerful Recognition of the Importance of Women to African American Religion.” In *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 3 (2011): 362-369. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.96.3.0362.

Gilyard, Keith and Adam J. Banks. *On African American Rhetoric*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Giver-Johnston, Donna. *Claiming the Call to Preach: Four Female Pioneers of Preaching in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Haywood, Chanta M. *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

hooks, bell. *ain’t i a woman: black women and feminism*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Houchins, Sue E. “Introduction.” In *Spiritual Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., xxix-xliv. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Hucks, Tracey E. “‘Burning with a Flame in America’: African American Women in African-Derived Traditions.” In *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (2001): 89-106. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002413.

Lejeune, Phillippe. *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Loewenberg, Bert James and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976.

Moody, Joycelyn. *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001

NPR Staff. "A Look Back at Women's Studies Since the 1970s." On *NPR*, March 17, 2010.

https://www.npr.org/2010/03/17/124775888/a-look-back-at-women-s-studies-since-the-1970s.

Olney, James. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

Plaskow, Judith. "The Academy as Real Life: New Participants and Paradigms in the Study of Religion." In *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, edited by Elizabeth A. Castelli with the assistance of Rosamond C. Rodman, 531-545. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. First published 1978.

Richardson, Marilyn. "Foreword." In *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, edited by William L. Andrews, viii-ix. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Second Edition.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24476.

Stevenson, Brenda E. "'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down': Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South." In *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 4 (2005): 345-367. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/marsa-never-sot-aunt-rebecca-down-enslaved-women/docview/194471359/se-2.

Thomas, Hilah F. and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds. *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1981.

Weisenfeld, Judith. "Invisible Women: On Women and Gender in the Study of African American Religious History." In *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 133-149. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jafrireli.1.1.0133.

Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.