



JESUS AND WOMEN

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Lection - Luke 7:36-50; 8:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version)

I. Introduction

The Gospel of Luke offers a mixed picture of the relationship between Jesus and women. According to gender-sensitive biblical scholarship, Luke's portrayal of women as followers of Jesus, subjects of his teaching, and objects of his healing is presented alongside women as subservient models of service. The task for readers of Luke is to retrieve those insights within the gospel that respect the experiences of women and thus can contribute to theology that supports the equality of women and men in Christian communities of faith.¹ Historical and contemporary African American women have been successful at retrieving those insights that support such equality as they sing, pray, testify, and interpret Jesus as their source and strength to overcome their experiences of oppression in church and society.

II. Song(s)

Jesus is Real to Me²

Real, real, Jesus is real to me.
Oh yes, He gives me the victory.
So many people doubt Him.
I can't live without Him.
That is why I love Him so,
He's so real to me.

A song, such as “Jesus is Real to Me,” points to what contemporary African American female scholars of religion describe as the African American woman’s affirmation of the historical Jesus and his ministerial vision of righting relationships as most important. Yes, Jesus is Christ—Savior and Redeemer of their souls, but it is the experience of Jesus as incarnate, made real, in their everyday lives of survival and surrogacy that grounds the relationship between Jesus and African American women.³

III. Jesus and Women: Liberator from Political and Economic Oppression

“Dear Massa Jesus, we all uns beg Ooner [you] come make us a call dis yere day. We is nutting but poor Ethiopian women and people ain’t tink much ‘bout we. We ain’t trust any of dem great high people for come to we church, but do’ you is de one great Massa, great too much dan Massa Linkum, you ain’t shame to care for we African people.”⁴

“Black women’s affirmation of Jesus as God meant that White People were not God.”⁵ Thus, as the slave woman prays to Jesus as Master, she denies the ultimate power of the white slave master. Likewise, although Lincoln’s work on behalf of black people is acknowledged, the slave woman is certain that Jesus is the one who is truly for black people. Given the context of slavery, it is therefore also a prayer deriving from a belief that Jesus is a liberator from political and economic oppression here on earth.

IV. Jesus and Women Followers: Justification of the Call to Preach

In her spiritual autobiography The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee (1836),⁶ Jarena Lee, an African Methodist Episcopal itinerant preacher, critiques the church and justifies her call to preach by referencing Mary as the first to proclaim the risen Lord:

“O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear nowadays for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? seeing the Saviour (sic) died for the woman as well as the man.

“If a man may preach, because the Saviour (sic) died for him, why not the woman? Seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour (sic), instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear.

“Did not Mary *first* preach the risen Saviour, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity—hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel? for she preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God.”⁷

Finally, according to the Gospels, women followed Jesus and were witnesses to his death and resurrection. African American women today are thus followers of Jesus who too claim their right to preach, teach, and lead in Christ’s church. Let the church say, Amen.

Notes

1. Shaberg, Jane. “Luke.” The Women’s Bible Commentary. Ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. pp. 275-292.
2. Brown, Beatrice. “Jesus Is Real to Me.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. # 501
3. *See* Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, for a discussion of a female-centered tradition of African American biblical appropriation described as a survival/quality of life tradition.
4. Carter, Harold A. The Prayer Tradition of Black People. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1976. p. 49.
5. Grant, Jacquelyn. “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, With Special Reference to Christology.” Black Theology A Documentary History. Ed. James H. Cone, and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Vol. 2 Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993. pp. 281-282.
6. Lee, Jarena. The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Philadelphia, PA: Pub. for the author, 1836 Rpt. by author in 1846 as: Religious Experiences and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee A Preachin' Woman. 1991 edition: Religious Experiences and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee A Preachin' Woman. Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union/Legacy Pub, 1991. (See excerpt from “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee” Brotherly Love, Part III: The Africans in America PBS. WGBH, Boston 1998. Online location: www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h1638t.html accessed 10 December 2007; see short bio of Jarena Lee: Ibid. Online location: www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h1638.html accessed 10 December 2007; see also, Andrews, William L. Classic African American Women's Narratives. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003 for memorable and important writing in prose by African American women before 1865 includes: Maria W. Stewart, Jarena Lee (her autobiography), Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Harriet E. Wilson, Harriet A. Jacobs, Charlotte L. Forten)
7. Lee, Jarena. “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee.” Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century. Ed. William A. Andrews. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986. pp. 35-37. Also found in Riggs, Marcia. Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: an Anthology. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.