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# Pauline “Adoption” Theology as Experiential Performance in the *Memoirs* of African American Itinerant Preacher Zilpha Elaw

## Abstract

Zilpha Elaw's *Memoirs* (1846) are distinctive in the degree to which Elaw filters her experiences through a particular systematic theology, crafting a text that coheres around a central doctrine from the New Testament letters of Paul: “the spirit of adoption.” Elaw's own conversion, sanctification, and commission, together with her ministrations to her “spiritual children” through emotional, participatory salvation experiences, can be read as performative rituals that organize Elaw's text and prove her theological construct of the Holy Spirit as a living, moving “spirit of adoption.” From the pulpit to the mourner's bench, sinners were actively (and theatrically) being transformed into children of God. In Elaw's text, these transformations culminate in the conversion of her own biological daughter, who becomes a decisive “seal” to her ministry at a camp meeting in 1830: the child of her body who becomes part of the body of Christ. Fueled by the Holy Spirit, the Pauline machinery Elaw sets in motion propels her through her own spiritual journey and itinerant preaching career, while holding out the promise of spiritual adoption for all—her daughter, her readers, and all Christians. Elaw's *Memoirs* are thus a sophisticated theological declaration of inclusivity (one Spirit, one family of God, cutting across boundaries of race, gender, and denominational divisions).

## Introduction

Protestant Christianity was an immediate, urgent, and necessary force in the life of Zilpha Elaw (c. 1790-1873). A freeborn African American itinerant evangelist who was a Methodist but preached independently of any denomination, Elaw penned her autobiography in the mid-1840s after a five-year mission to England. Read alongside other spiritual autobiographies by nineteenth-century black women, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]* is typical of the genre: Elaw performs rhetorical acts of submission to the Holy Spirit while simultaneously displaying her literary prowess, explaining the significance of her religious calling, extrasensory visions, and preaching activities. Like autobiographer Jarena Lee, Elaw deftly navigates the space between those who would challenge her God-given calling preach (interpret scripture) rather than to simply exhort (telling the story of her own salvation and urging others to convert)<sup>1</sup>; like Shaker Eldress Rebecca Cox Jackson describing vivid manifestations of Christ through the action of her “spirit eye,” Elaw details moments of theophany and possession by the Holy Spirit in her conversion and commission; like widely published author, antislavery activist, women’s rights advocate, and temperance champion Frances Ellen Watkins Harper does in her poems featuring strong biblical women, Elaw points to numerous female figures from the Bible as models for leadership and discipleship for her readers; and like Julia A. J. Foote, a fellow Methodist and itinerant preacher of the following generation, Elaw believes in the potential of the Holy Spirit to transform both personal relationships and unjust social hierarchies along lines of race, gender, and class. Yet even among her contemporaries, Elaw’s *Memoirs* are unique in the degree to which Elaw filters her experiences through a particular systematic theology, crafting a text that unifies and coheres around a central doctrine from the New Testament letters of Paul: “the spirit of adoption.”

Elaw takes up two key principles of Pauline theology to interpret her own experiences and draw her readers to Christ: first, the idea that those who reject sin and embrace Christ become “adopted” children of God through the Holy Spirit, and second, the precept that those who are baptized in Christ become one in the Spirit, members of one “body” (the church).<sup>2</sup> Even more crucially for scholars of spiritual autobiography, Elaw uses the Pauline phrase “spirit of adoption” as a trope that animates and organizes her text, thus highlighting the chronology of spiritual events (conversion, sanctification, commission, converting others) rather than earthly personal milestones that we may expect from autobiographies (birth, schooling, marriage, death, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Through this “adoption” language in her text, Elaw variously claims God as her holy parent when she has no other guardian to confide in, counteracts racial and gender prejudice, underscores the importance of her ministry to the family of God (while downplaying her responsibilities to her earthly family), explains the importance of sanctification as a prerequisite for ministry, and proclaims the ideal of a single, unified church in Christ across denominations. For Elaw, the agency of the Holy Spirit becomes part of the experiential performance crucial to the believer’s enjoyment of the “spirit of adoption.” Elaw presents the Spirit as an indwelling force that frees the believer from sin, animates personal devotion and public worship, and facilitates interpersonal and social relationships.

This essay argues that Elaw’s *Memoirs* are a sophisticated theological declaration of inclusivity (one Spirit, one family of God, cutting across the boundaries of race, gender, and denominational divisions) that Elaw makes intelligible to her readers by relying on the strength of her personal experiences. Together with her own conversion, sanctification, and commission, Elaw’s ministrations to her “spiritual children”—particularly through emotional, participatory conversion experiences on her itinerant preaching circuits and at camp meetings—can be read as performative rituals that organize Elaw’s text and prove her theological construct of the Holy Spirit as a living, moving “spirit of adoption”: from the pulpit to the mourner’s bench, sinners were actively (and theatrically) being transformed into children of God. In Elaw’s text, these transformations culminate in the conversion of her own biological daughter, who becomes a decisive “seal” to her ministry at a camp meeting in 1830: the child of her body who becomes part of the body of Christ. Fueled by the Holy Spirit, the Pauline machinery Elaw sets in motion when referencing the “spirit of adoption” propels her through her own spiritual journey, while holding out the promise of adoption for all—her daughter, her readers, and the entire body of Christ.

### **Elaw’s Performance of Genre: Spiritual Autobiography**

When Zilpha Elaw published her autobiography in London in 1846, she included a “Dedication” addressed to British Christians among whom she had lived and worked for the previous five years. From its opening salutation to closing blessing, this letter follows the biblical model of Pauline epistles in form and tone (e.g., “Grace be unto you, and peace,” [Elaw [1846] 1986, 51]).<sup>4</sup> Her letter also imitates Pauline epistles thematically: she personally reminisces about pleasant and invigorating spiritual encounters with her addressees, proclaims her unlikely status as a gospel messenger (referring to her own “poor and weak instrumentality” as a “coloured female”), and asks them to pray for her ministry (51). Most importantly, like Paul, Elaw challenges her readers to live holy lives modeled after Jesus Christ (52). Finally, Elaw ends her dedication with a parting blessing taken from the last verse of 2 Corinthians: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen” (52).<sup>5</sup>

By framing her *Memoirs* with a dedication letter in the style of a Pauline epistle, Elaw positions herself as an apostle and her autobiography as a missionary text. That is, she prepares her readers for a narrative of her personal journey of Christian discipleship along with an account of her public missionary journeys to “preach Christ, and Him crucified” (140). Her book itself is also an instrument of ministry; by infusing her dedication with Pauline language, Elaw sets up theological and rhetorical expectations to be fulfilled in the rest of her text. Elaw’s dedication also reminds us of her publishing savvy. As Kimberly Blockett argues, Elaw very deliberately chose the format of a book rather than disseminate her message through newspapers, magazines, or pamphlets that might not be extant for later generations: “Although the vast majority of early African American print culture exists in a multitude of forms other than bound books, Elaw chose to publish in book form, as did Jarena Lee, presumably to add her particular black female experience as a more permanent record in the growing body of bound spiritual narratives flourishing in the United States and England” (2015, 105). It is clear that Elaw intended her book to be an ongoing, intergenerational

instrument of ministry, but also a contribution to the canon of a particular genre: spiritual autobiography.

Entrée into the realm of spiritual autobiography was somewhat fraught for women. Although referring to the English autobiographical tradition, Linda Peterson's description of the "hermeneutic origin (or basis)" of the genre of spiritual autobiography can also apply to the American case, as both hearken back to a "Protestant tradition of religious introspection" that can be traced to John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) (1988, 213).<sup>6</sup> Peterson uses the word "hermeneutic" to emphasize two kinds of interpretation that take place in spiritual autobiographies: "the act of self-interpretation" and the deliberate, thoughtful adoption of "patterns and principles of interpretation from biblical hermeneutics (originally from biblical typology)" (1988, 213). Peterson's essay goes on to explain why Victorian women eschewed hermeneutic practices in general and the genre of spiritual autobiography in particular, citing biblical obstacles ("Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But...suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence," 1 Tim. 2:11-12 [KJV]), exclusionary church practices (being forbidden to preach, interpret scripture, or become ordained), and a growing emphasis on hermeneutics as a specialized academic enterprise (1988, 216).

Nineteenth-century American women faced some of the same challenges as their English counterparts when it came to practicing hermeneutics. However, as Nancy Hardesty explains in *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, the Second Great Awakening during the early nineteenth century revolutionized the nation's religious sensibilities, transitioning from "Puritan theology with its predestined elect [that] encouraged a stratified society" (1999, 48) to a more democratic revivalism that could lead to social justice: "The experience of conversion and sanctification unleashed a power within Christian society that had the potential to eradicate racial and sexual prejudices" (1999, 51). This emphasis on experiential religion helped usher in "a more radically inclusive Christianity," giving those with less power in society—particularly women and African Americans—the chance to be heard, testifying to the power of the Holy Spirit through exhortation, preaching, and even the interpretation of scripture (Brekus 1998, 158).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, as Hardesty, Catherine Brekus, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and others have shown, both black and white women were practicing a kind of Bible-based proto-feminism during the nineteenth century, reinterpreting passages that had been used to keep women silent or subordinate, pointing to strong female figures in the Bible who were leaders and apostles, and expounding verses that held forth the promise of women as preachers and prophets (such as Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17—"I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy"—and Gal. 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" [KJV]).<sup>8</sup> More importantly, for black women, the subversive, liberatory potential of these verses was clear; following in the footsteps of pathbreaking scholars like Nellie Y. McKay, Sallie M. Cuffee notes that "early black women freely adopted Judeo-Christian biblical rhetoric to dispute assigned racial and gender ontologies to accomplish their goal of self-representation and self-empowerment" (2016, 59). As self-declared conduits of the Spirit, women like Elaw benefited from (and helped to further) the inclusive Christianity that stemmed from revivalism and an egalitarian hermeneutic principle that was growing during the nineteenth century in America.

Yet even though Elaw clearly espouses strong egalitarian hermeneutic principles in her text, she is careful to ascribe power to God through the Holy Spirit, keeping the reader focused on God’s message as exemplified in her life and work, for God’s glory rather than her own (68, 70).<sup>9</sup> Beginning with the very first page of her text, Elaw assiduously maintains that her authority to speak comes from God and that any ministerial competency she might possess is God-given, not the result of her own talent or abilities. On the title page of her *Memoirs*, Elaw includes an epigraph that testifies to God’s power: “‘Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.’ 2 Cor. iii. 5” (49).<sup>10</sup> In her dedication, Elaw continues this theme by adopting more of Paul’s self-effacing sentiments from the book of 2 Corinthians and adapting imagery from the Song of Solomon. She offers her book to her English “Brethren and Friends” in visual terms, saying:

...I feel that I cannot present you with a more appropriate keepsake, or a more lively memento of my Christian esteem...than the following contour portrait of my regenerated constitution—exhibiting, as did the bride of Solomon, comeliness with blackness [Song of Sol. 1:5]; and, as did the apostle Paul, riches with poverty, and power in weakness [2 Cor. 12:9]—a representation, not, indeed, of the features of my outward person, drawn and coloured by the skill of the pencilling artist, but of the lineaments of my *inward man*, as inscribed by the Holy Ghost, and, according to my poor ability, copied off for your edification. (51; emphasis added)<sup>11</sup>

By juxtaposing biblical allusions to create parallel word pairings (comeliness/blackness, riches/poverty, power/weakness), Elaw suggests that her combined race and gender status, which readers might consider as detracting from her message, is actually a source of strength. Indeed, as Katherine Clay Bassard has argued, “Elaw’s subtle rewriting of *Song of Songs* 1:5 through her phrase ‘comeliness *with* blackness’ ([Bassard’s] emphasis) overturns the racial pejorative of the original terms” (2010, 22). That God can make use of Elaw despite her low position as a black woman is a great testament to God’s power, as Elaw is quick to point out in numerous places throughout her autobiography.<sup>12</sup> But Elaw does not want to linger over her physical attributes and outward self-presentation; she goes on to explain that her book is really a portrait of her inner life. Employing the phrase “inward man,” Elaw again relies on Pauline language to describe her literary project, drawing from a verse that explains how Jesus’ death and resurrection makes possible the spiritual life of the believer: “but though our outward man perish, yet the *inward man* is renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16 [KJV]; emphasis added). Through successive layers of scriptural references, Elaw suggests that her own spiritual progression can serve as a model for the “progressive prosperity and perfection in the Christian calling” that she wishes for her readers, yet she also avoids self-aggrandizement by emphasizing the role of the Spirit in the authorship of her text, “as inscribed by the Holy Ghost” (51). In doing so, Elaw seems to celebrate her “regenerated” inner self, spiritually born again through the sufficiency of God’s grace (2 Cor. 12:9) and dedicated to God and to the “edification” of her readers.

In short, Elaw’s dedication places her text in the tradition of spiritual autobiography while simultaneously laying the foundation for her most important theological themes. Announcing herself as an adopted child of God, Elaw gives her readers the information necessary to also become children of God through grace in the “spirit of adoption,” claiming a spiritual “inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (52; see Acts 20:32).

## Becoming an “Adopted Child of Divine Love”: Elaw’s Conversion and Baptism

According to biographical information presented in her *Memoirs*, Elaw was born to free parents in Pennsylvania in the last decade of the eighteenth century, one of only three of her parents’ twenty-two children to survive infancy. When Elaw was twelve, her mother passed away in childbirth. Her father then placed her as a servant in a white Quaker household. Not even two years later, her father also died. Without her parents, Elaw had no choice but to stay on as a domestic with her “kind benefactors” until she was eighteen (53). The more detail Elaw gives regarding her Quaker “benefactors,” however, the more it seems that they left much to be desired in her eyes. While Elaw remembers “family devotion” as a lively, rewarding daily activity in her parents’ home, Quaker devotions “were performed in the secret silence of the mind,” making it difficult for the young Elaw to feel comfortable in her new surroundings (54). As a result, Elaw claims, she was left to her own devices and fell into sinful habits and imprudent behavior, even going so far as to take God’s name in vain (54). Despite her irreligious acts, Elaw writes that God did not abandon her during this difficult period. Instead, her “heavenly Father” reached out to her in the form of a terrifying dream wherein judgment day had arrived and she felt herself unready to appear before Him (55). Apparently, this dream unsettled the fourteen-year-old Elaw so much that her mistress noticed a change in her manner and asked what was the matter. When Elaw explained her dream, she was told not to worry about it: “dreams have nothing ominous in them” (55). As a mature Christian narrator interpreting the thoughts of her adolescent self, Elaw suggests that her very soul was at stake, but that her spiritually clueless mistress did not realize it.

According to her text, Elaw finally experienced conversion—reassurance that God heard her prayers and had forgiven her sins—through a vision of Jesus coming toward her and smiling as if to say, “I own thy name” (56). Upon relating this vision, Elaw immediately interrupts the flow of her narration to anticipate the possible objections of skeptical readers: “Some persons, perhaps, may be incredulous, and say, ‘How can these things be, and in what form did He appear?’ Dear reader, whoever thou art, into whose hands this narrative may fall, I will try to gratify thee by endeavouring to describe his manifestation” (56). Elaw sets the scene: there she was in a cow stall, going about the daily chore of milking while singing to herself a hymn (fittingly, “Oh, when shall I see Jesus”), when Jesus appeared before her. She substantiates this vision by noting that the cow “turned her head and looked round” at the approaching figure, too, bowing low (57). Elaw reasons that the cow would not have responded thus if the heavenly manifestation had only been in “the eye of [her] mind” (56).

Rhetorically, this stage-like visionary encounter with Jesus gives Elaw the opportunity to portray herself as a reliable narrator, solemnly pledging herself to her readers in the language of jurisprudence: “I write as before God and Christ, and declare, as I shall give an account to my Judge at the great day, that every thing I have written in this little book, has been written with conscientious veracity and scrupulous adherence to the truth” (57). No longer the teenage girl who lightly took God’s name in vain and dreamed she was unfit to meet her maker, the fifty-something Elaw narrating her autobiography demonstrates just how much she has grown spiritually by proclaiming the authenticity of her words before the Father and Son whom she will no

longer fear at judgment day. Through this declarative act, Elaw affirms the accuracy of her narrative, all but signing her name on the line as she puts God in the role of notary and her readers in the role of witnesses to (and beneficiaries of) the contract.<sup>13</sup> Elaw also demonstrates that she firmly believes in her spiritual experiences and has the authority and wherewithal to interpret them in “unvarnished” prose (57). More importantly, relating her vision of Jesus and attendant conversion draws a stark contrast between her Quaker mistress—who did not put stock in dreams or visions—and Elaw’s own encounter with theophany, her own *interpretation* of that theophany. With no beloved earthly parent to guide her, Elaw suggests that her younger self had to learn to trust in and process experiential manifestations of the divine on her own.

Having thoroughly elucidated her rather theatrical conversion experience, Elaw resumes the discussion of her continuing run-ins with her mistress, who treated her poorly even after her behavior changed post-conversion (57). Evidently, Elaw could not win: before her conversion, Elaw’s boisterousness caused her mistress to accuse her of “pertness and insolent behaviour,” and afterward, her changed deportment was deemed “sullenness and mopishness” (59). At this turning point in her text, Elaw avails herself of numerous Bible verses to show that God nurtured her during this time of strife. Like Moses, she was “hid in the cleft of the rock” (Exod. 33:22); like Paul, she “put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11); like a lamb, she was carried in the “bosom” of her shepherd (Isa. 40:11) (58). As Elaw constructs it, God was the only witness to her tears, the only person to give ear to her sufferings: “There were no persons in the house in which I resided, to whom I could at any time open my mind...and amongst them I dwelt as a speckled bird” (58-59). By describing herself as a “speckled bird,” Elaw alludes to a particular verse befitting her situation: “Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her” (Jer. 12:9a [KJV]). Elaw clearly felt like an outsider, singled out for the “speckled” qualities that separated her from the “birds” around her who belittled her for being different. The word “speckled” may have racial implications, since Elaw likely felt alienated as a black young woman serving in a white household. Elaw is also using the phrase “speckled bird” in the sense of “a person who differs so much from the company he is in as to be an object of suspicion or distrust,” since her mistress had little regard for her and found fault with her behavior no matter what (Webster 1877, s.v. “speckled bird”). In any case, surrounded by adversaries, Elaw says she had no one to turn to but her heavenly parent. Like the aggrieved speaker of the chapter of Jeremiah from which Elaw drew her “speckled bird” simile, Elaw seems to be asking God, “Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?” (Jer. 12.1b [KJV]).

At this textual juncture, Elaw brings the reader into her writing present, keenly feeling the absence of her parents a second time as she narrates her past woes. Elaw indicates that her living situation during her teenage years did not come close to approximating the love and tenderness she would have experienced had her parents lived longer. In particular, the mature Elaw expresses grief as she recalls the mindset of her younger self “bitterly” missing her mother, which causes her to remark in the vocative present tense: “Oh, how often do I think of the advantages enjoyed by many young people, who are blessed with devout and godly parents...who, instead of greatly prizing the grace conferred upon them, resent the kind restraints of family worship and attendance at the house of God” (59). Elaw admonishes any “perverse and giddy” youngsters who may be reading her text to mend their ways and realize what a great treasure they have inherited through their religious parents (59).

Although Elaw did not have the benefit of her parents' instruction during adolescence, she maintains that she found hope and solace by joining a Methodist class meeting in the area in 1808 (57).<sup>14</sup> These weekly group meetings were a unique and successful community-building tool of Methodist system, and given her isolation, Elaw must have enjoyed such fellowship. But it wasn't easy for Elaw to get to the class meeting she attended: She had to travel on foot two miles each way through the woods at night past two graveyards in order to attend this meeting, which might seem lonely, frightening, or dangerous for a young woman (60). (Indeed, Elaw informs her English readers that "a two miles journey in the more rural territories of the United States, is very different from the same distance along the streets or well frequented roads of England," 60.) Yet she explains that, while she had been "superstitious" and afraid of the dark before her conversion, she had no fear after Jesus appeared to her in the cow stall (59). Trusting God to protect her, the walks to and from her class meeting became joyous experiences of communication with her heavenly Father:

I enjoyed richly the spirit of adoption: knowing myself to be an adopted child of divine love, I claimed God as my Father, and his Son Jesus as my dear friend, who adhered to me more faithfully in goodness than a brother: and with my blessed Saviour, Redeemer, Intercessor, and Patron, I enjoyed a delightful heavenly communion, such as the world has never conceived of. (60)

This passage is the first time that Elaw employs "adoption" language in her text; as stated at the beginning of this article, "adoption" is a key theological trope for Elaw across her *Memoirs*. In this instance, Elaw utilizes phraseology from Romans to establish her place as a child in the family of God through the "spirit of adoption" (Rom. 8:15). The verses immediately surrounding Romans 8:15 read, "...ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:15b-16 [KJV]). The words "Abba, Father" are significant because they were purportedly spoken by Jesus pleading with God his Father when praying in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his execution (Mark 14:36; Coogan et al. 2001, 254 New Testament). The parallels between Elaw and Jesus are important; just as Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father in a personal way during a difficult time of "temptation" (Mark 14:38 [KJV]), Elaw also prayed to God her Father when "Satan...assailed [her] with various trials and temptations" such as the difficulties she suffered at the hands of her Quaker mistress (58). Coming right on the heels of Elaw's commentary on the toxic atmosphere of her mistress's household, Elaw's proclamation of "God as [her] Father" and Jesus akin to a "dear friend" and "brother" takes on significance unique to her situation (60). The contrast between her earthly mistress and her heavenly Father could hardly be plainer.

Elaw summarizes the three years following her conversion by stating that God became her spiritual mentor and educator, "instructing me by his Holy Spirit, in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures" (60). Similar to one of her contemporaries—Shaker Eldress Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871) asserted that God used "dreams and visions and revelation and gifts" to instruct her when no human could (Jackson 1981, 96)—Elaw continues, "It was not by the aid of human instruments that I was first drawn to Christ; and it was by the Lord alone that I was upheld, confirmed, instructed, sanctified, and directed" (60). Even so, Elaw underscores the importance of certain "human instruments" by mentioning two Methodist class leaders who were important to her religious development. Immediately after her conversion, Elaw "went up formally to



present [her] hand to the brethren, and [her] heart for ever to the Lord” by giving her testimony in a class meeting under the direction of the Rev. J. Polhemus, an itinerant minister (57). Later, after a six-month probationary period, Elaw was baptized “into the one body of Jesus” by the Rev. Joseph Lybrand and became “a full member of the [Methodist] society” (60, 61). Elaw presents her baptism as a transcendent experience, using her first-person narrative voice to (paradoxically) comment on the obliteration of her selfhood within the wonderment of divine love: “I was so overwhelmed with the love of God, that self seemed annihilated: I was completely lost and absorbed in the divine fascinations” (61).

It is important to note that Elaw’s narrative actually presents two avenues through which she became “an adopted child of divine love” (60). The first avenue is her conversion, a justification by faith confirmed by both her mystical vision of Jesus and through the testimony she gave before the members of her Methodist class meeting. The second avenue is baptism, a ritual consecrating her to “the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” and sealing her membership in the family of God (as Elaw notes, baptism allows her to participate in the ritual of communion, 61). In a sense, God’s love gives Elaw comfort in the form of a heavenly Father and leads her to find a “happy home” (her words) among Methodists, an adoptive family replacing the one she lost when her parents passed away and making up for what she had to endure as a servant in the household of a demanding mistress (61). Indeed, as Elaw demonstrates in the next part of her *Memoirs*, she prized her intimate connection with God and worked hard to maintain relationships with her “adopted” brothers and sisters in Christ, prioritizing the work she felt God calling her to do above all else. Her spiritual family took precedence over her earthly family.

### **“The Lord Opened My Mouth in Public Prayer”: Elaw’s Sanctification and Commission**

In the nearly twenty-five pages of Zilpha Elaw’s *Memoirs* that cover the years of her life during which she was married to Joseph Elaw (from their marriage in 1810 until Joseph’s death on January 27, 1823), there are no direct references to spiritual “adoption” (61-85). Although the lack of “adoption” language in the pages that correspond with her narration of the period of her marriage is likely inadvertent, it is nevertheless an extraordinary, provocative coincidence. By her own account, Elaw made the mistake of marrying someone who was considered “a very respectable young man, in the general acceptation of the term,” but he turned out to be a Christian in name only, not a true believer living in the Spirit according to Christ’s teachings (61). In short, in Elaw’s opinion, Joseph had not experienced a sincere conversion that would have made him a child of God (63). Worse still, after their first year of marriage, Joseph stopped even pretending to change his life and accept Christianity, actively opposing the exercise of his wife’s faith: “he resolved to use every means to induce me to renounce my religion, and abolish my attendance at the meeting-house” (63). To say the least, Elaw characterizes her marriage as an exceptional challenge to her belief system. By being “unequally yoked” to an unbeliever, Elaw feels she cannot fulfill her wifely scriptural duty and be her husband’s “help-meet” (61-62).<sup>15</sup>

Given Elaw’s later career as an itinerant minister who preached all over the Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic, and Southern (slaveholding) states and eventually embarked on a mission to England, it might be perplexing that someone so competent

and strong-minded would espouse views that seem to limit her independence, such as, “That woman is dependant on and subject to man, is the dictate of nature; that the man is not created for the woman, but the woman for the man, is that of Scripture [1 Cor. 11:9]” (61-62). Although this sentence may sound extreme, it is helpful to keep in mind that Elaw’s line of reasoning is based on a chapter from 1 Corinthians that also states, “that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11.3 [KJV]). This chain of headship—God, Christ, man, woman—does not seem to be a simple hierarchy for Elaw. She goes on to explain that an ideal Christian marriage is characterized by “mutual sympathy and affectionate accordance” because “both parties are cordially progressing on the king’s highway” (62). Both husband and wife, then, are subject to God, and traveling Christ’s road together. Moreover, “subjection” is not a dirty word to Elaw. Her epigraph confirms her view that autonomy and self-reliance are not the most important qualities for Christians; on the contrary, “sufficiency” comes from God (49).

Elaw’s belief that her husband does not fulfill his role within the God-ordained institution of marriage permits her to perform acts of disengagement from her husband—textually, at least, since she did not actually leave or divorce him. Though she believes in a scriptural basis for male headship, she cannot properly submit to her husband because he is not a Christian. Instead, she focuses on her submission to her heavenly Father. In Elaw’s narrative, nothing keeps her from her relationship with God, at least not for long. Even a life-threatening illness could serve as a reminder to practice “absolute submission to the will of God” (76). For instance, at one point in 1819 when Elaw thought she was on her deathbed, she had a discussion with her husband about the fate of their seven-year-old daughter, a discussion born out of a mother’s “natural anxiety” for the welfare of her child (76). According to Elaw, this incident made her realize that earthly familial bonds could become a hindrance to her relationship with her heavenly Father, and she asked God to “...wean [her] from all the excesses of nature’s ties” (76). As this scene demonstrates, in Elaw’s view, anything that stands between her and God must be surrendered.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of her text, with God’s help, Elaw overcomes her husband’s hostility, financial difficulties, illness, self-doubt, and other threats to her person and ministry, and each victory brings her that much closer to God. Joycelyn Moody’s point in her groundbreaking work, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, about the rhetorical function of Elaw’s struggles with her husband can be applied to all the obstacles Elaw faces: “Her autobiographical accounts of [her husband’s] impediments clearly function to cast her story as the more laudable, her God the more impressive” (2001, 60). The more obedient Elaw is to God’s “heavenly direction,” the more wonders she experiences (69).

In fact, throughout her *Memoirs*, Elaw describes numerous experiences where she intensely feels God’s presence and direction in her life. Perhaps the two most momentous and mystical of these are her sanctification and commission. Significantly, both of these events take place in a setting that her husband has “an extravagant prejudice against”: the camp meeting (79). As social historian of religion David Hempton explains, camp meetings in the United States “became a normal part of the Methodist experience, as much on the eastern seaboard as on the expanding frontier” (2005, 80). Thousands of people would come to a pre-determined rural location and set up their tents around a common area where worship would take place throughout the day and long into the night; preaching, praying, exhorting, singing, shouting, and

ecstatic movement were all part of the mix (Frey and Wood 1998, 140-41; Hempton 2005, 80). Elaw goes into great detail to describe the revival atmosphere of these events, as well as the layout of tents, seating, and preaching platforms. She refers to the camp as a “City of the Lord,” similar to “God’s ancient and holy hill of Zion on her brightest festival days” (65).

In the hyper-charged, Spirit-filled atmosphere of an 1817 camp meeting, Elaw says she experienced sanctification. Generally, sanctification refers to an experience of grace that goes beyond conversion, setting the believer apart for a holy life free from intentional sin, or in Elaw’s words, “the indwelling presence and superintending sway of the Holy Spirit in a clean and obedient heart” (68). She describes the moment of her own sanctification as an overwhelming out-of-body experience during which a voice clearly said to her, “Now thou art sanctified; and I will show thee what thou must do” (66).<sup>17</sup> Coming out of this “trance or ecstasy,” she continued to feel the intensity of God’s presence close to her, extending the extrasensory episode: “Truly I durst not move, because God was so powerfully near to me; for the space of several hours I appeared not to be on earth, but far above all earthly things” (67). To help explain the “solemn stillness” she felt in this moment, Elaw quotes two lines without attribution: “The speechless awe that dares not move, / And all the silent heaven of love” (67). These lines are actually from a two-part hymn by Charles Wesley that tells a single story of reconciliation between sinners and God (“Sinners, Obey the Gospel Word” and “Come, O Ye Sinners, to the Lord”). The first part uses one of Wesley’s most beloved texts, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), putting the words of the prodigal’s father into the mouths of the three persons of the Trinity, ready to reclaim the lost sinner as a child of God:

The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
Are ready, with their shining host:  
All heaven is ready to resound,

“The dead’s alive! the lost is found!” (1878, hymn 350, stanza 5)<sup>18</sup>

The second part of Wesley’s hymn extends the theme of God’s offer to restore the sinner through grace, celebrating the peace that comes with “the mystic joys of penitence” (1878, hymn 351, stanza 2). These “mystic joys” that mesmerize the redeemed when in God’s presence are precisely what Elaw wants to evoke by quoting lines from this particular two-part hymn, since the thralldom Wesley describes is consistent with her sanctification experience. Of course, the larger allusion of this hymn—the prodigal son—is also consistent with Elaw’s emphasis on the “spirit of adoption” working to create the family of God.

By choosing lines from a hymn by Charles Wesley for this scene, Elaw also potentially gives us insight into her own sanctification theology. Although Charles Wesley is better remembered as a Methodist hymnodist than as a theologian—his older brother, John, is generally credited as the founder of Methodism and the driving force behind Methodist theology—Charles was an important religious thinker in his own right, disseminating key biblical insights through itinerant preaching and hymn-writing (Tyson 1989, 11 and 14). For Charles, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were all important to the process of Christian perfection: “sanctification as ‘Perfect Love’ looked to ‘Love’ as the Divine essence to explain how God or Christ was formed within the Christian through the workings of the Holy Spirit” (Tyson 1989, 46-47). Similarly, Elaw understands her sanctification as facilitated by the Spirit: “I clearly saw by the light of the Holy Ghost, that my heart and soul were rendered completely spotless” (67). Elaw

recognizes the action of the Holy Spirit again in the direction that God gives her immediately after experiencing sanctification, when “the Lord opened [her] mouth in public prayer” and also allowed her to lead others in prayer (67). She explains, “before the meeting at this camp closed, it was revealed to me by the Holy Spirit, that like another Phoebe...I must employ myself in visiting families...and attend upon other of the errands and services of the Lord” (67). As Elaw lays out this sequence of events, it becomes clear that the Holy Spirit’s ministrations to her soul through sanctification enable her to begin ministering to others. Elaw takes up this “family or household ministry” for five years (71), until God calls her to a larger public vocation—preaching the gospel as an itinerant minister (73). As Rosetta Renae Haynes points out in *Radical Spiritual Motherhood: Autobiography and Empowerment in Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, it would be artificial to suggest that there was a bright line separating Elaw’s domestic ministry from her public ministry (2010, 75): “The boundaries between home and the public sphere are complicated as the radical spiritual mothers engage in serial domesticity, or a kind of itineracy that involved traveling from house to house and church to church (houses of God or houses of worship) in order to minister to the needs of the family of God” (2010, 74). Haynes reads this “like another Phoebe” moment in Elaw’s *Memoirs* as a way for Elaw to come to terms with her public ministerial calling: “Becoming a public religious leader meant fundamentally reformulating her relationship to power, and it seems that a necessary part of that reformulation involved ‘domesticating’ this power in order to justify to herself and to others the new authority she was garnering” (2010, 75).

Thus, by likening herself to Phoebe, Elaw joined the ranks of nineteenth-century women who justified their roles as religious leaders by looking to female role models in the Bible, particularly women in the New Testament who served as apostles (Hardesty 1999, 63). As historian Nancy Hardesty reminds us, these women “knew that King James’s translators had done all women a disservice by calling Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 a ‘servant’ when Paul called her a ‘deacon’ or minister” (1999, 63). A generation after Elaw, Julia A. J. Foote directly mentions the case of Phoebe in her spiritual autobiography when discussing gender-biased translation issues; she continues, sarcastically, “When Paul said, ‘Help those women who labor with me in the Gospel,’ he certainly meant that they did more than to pour out tea” ([1879] 1986, 209). Similarly, Elaw mentions Phoebe a second time in her *Memoirs* as part of a long list of “Christian females who promoted the cause of Jesus” in the Bible (124). However, Elaw glosses over the translation issues surrounding the particular descriptor for Phoebe’s role by giving both alternatives: “St. Paul himself attests that Phoebe was a *servant* or *deaconess* of the Church at Cenchrea; and as such was employed by the Church to manage some of their affairs” (124; emphasis added). Ultimately, even though Elaw concedes that “the Apostle Paul laid it down as a rule, that females should not speak in the church, nor be suffered to teach,” she emphasizes that the action of the Holy Spirit supersedes this rule (124). Citing the realization of Joel’s prophecy through Pentecost (Acts 2:16-18), Elaw concludes: “the Christian dispensation has for its main feature the inspirations of the holy prophetic Spirit, descending on the handmaids as well as on the servants of God; and thus qualifying both for the conversion of men, and spread of the Gospel” (124). To sum up Elaw’s position, the message of the New Testament is dependent on the remarkable power of the Spirit as “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34b [KJV]). The Spirit commissions both genders to preach the gospel.

According to Elaw, the “energies of the Holy Spirit” were instrumental at a camp meeting where she received her commission to become an evangelist, just two years after she received the blessing of sanctification (82). As with her sanctification experience, Elaw heard a voice that provided her with spiritual direction.<sup>19</sup> This time, however, the Spirit seems to prompt her from within, causing her to begin exhorting those around her “with a loud voice” (82). The way Elaw tells it, the Holy Spirit virtually took possession of her body and words seemed to pour out of her mouth, “as it were involuntarily” (82).<sup>20</sup> Notice Elaw’s commentary on the significance of this entire scene: she notes that her commission came from God, “not from mortal man”; she makes much of the camp meeting setting, pointing out that her “ministry was commenced in the midst of thousands who were both eye and ear witnesses of the fact”; and, finally, her reflections bring her back to the present, as she exclaims, “Oh, adorable Trinity! dispose me to do thy holy will in all things” (82). Narratively, the Holy Spirit’s agency gives Elaw great religious insight, strengthens her to do God’s work, and gives her a sense of soul-transporting wonderment that practically exceeds her ability to write about it. Similar to Elaw’s account of her initial conversion (“joy in the Holy Ghost...unutterable by my tongue and indescribable by my pen,” 57), Elaw clearly writes about her commission while testifying to the inexpressibility of her elation. For Elaw, as for Charles Wesley, many words are needed to attest to the ineffable beauty of the Holy Spirit’s work in drawing the believer into the family of God and closer to the glorious Trinity. Exclaiming and extrapolating upon the ineffability of the Spirit is itself a sophisticated—if paradoxical—testament to the theological mystery of the indwelling Spirit that can preclude sin within the life of the believer.

Although Elaw’s commission gave her a new role in God’s family, her earthly family was another matter. Not surprisingly—at this point in her text, the reader could hardly be startled by this turn of events—Elaw states that her husband did not approve of her new preaching career. Given the groundwork laid, Elaw’s response to her husband’s disapproval is predictable, too: “I was very sorry to see [my husband] so much grieved...but my heavenly Father had informed me that he had a great work for me to do; I could not therefore descend down to the counsel of flesh and blood, but adhered faithfully to my commission” (84). Elizabeth Elkin Grammer has observed that, in the autobiographical narratives of nineteenth-century women who felt God’s call to itinerant ministry, these exchanges between a commissioned wife and her disapproving husband lead to unavoidable outcomes:

At times in these narratives the relationship between the evangelist’s frustrated will and the husband’s untimely death starts to look like cause and effect: when Zilpha Elaw details her husband’s opposition to her new role as “public speaker,” we are not surprised to hear her immediately report, “My poor husband’s health about this time began visibly to decline” (84). (Grammer 2003, 39)

Elaw reports that her husband finally succumbed to consumption after a long period of sickness (84-85). Even near the end, Elaw seems to have been uncertain about the state of her husband’s soul; although she notes that he apologized to her for his past behavior and that a “calmness and sweetness” eventually came over him, she does not give the reader full assurance of his salvation (84). As a substitute for a spiritual deathbed scene, Elaw includes another hymn fragment as a placeholder for her husband’s reconciliation with God: “Above the rest this note shall swell, / My Jesus hath done all things well” (84).<sup>21</sup> Metaphorically, this “note” seems to soar above all of

the discord of Elaw's marriage to remind her that her husband was in God's hands. In her text, Elaw allows the hymn fragment to textually set aside her marital problems, while simultaneously setting up a poignant juxtaposition between her irredeemable husband and her believing daughter.

### **“Many a Mother Strongly Felt with Me”: The Conversion of Elaw's Daughter**

Elaw may not have known whether or not her husband was ultimately reconciled with God, but she verifies that her daughter enjoyed the “spirit of adoption” in her late teens. In fact, Elaw explains that she herself was the instrument God used to “capture [her] own daughter in the gospel net” at a camp meeting in Oyster Bay, New York, around 1830 (103). Long before her conversion, however, Elaw's daughter is portrayed as a staunch supporter of her mother's ministerial labors. Even when Elaw left her daughter behind with a relative in order to answer God's call and begin a self-supported, Spirit-directed itinerant ministry in earnest, she records her daughter as saying to her, “...do not think any thing about me, for I shall do very well” (89). As a character in Elaw's *Memoirs*, her daughter brings together the potentially conflicting responsibilities Elaw feels as a biological mother and a spiritual mother. Nowhere is this fusion more evident than in her daughter's conversion scene.

As we have already seen, in Elaw's text, moments of Spirit-driven conversion, sanctification, and commission are particularly poignant in the liminal spaces of camp meetings, where hundreds or thousands of people from various walks of life would attend days-long revival events (preaching, prophesying, prayer, hymn-singing, etc.) in the open air. Elaw explains that she was preaching “in the midst of hundreds” at one such camp meeting when her daughter began to feel the full weight of her sins and cried aloud to the Lord for mercy (103). The text Elaw was expounding on that day is so perfect for the scene, it seems like it could have been written just for Elaw and her daughter, since it concerns both the covenant between God and humanity and the responsibility of parents to teach their children God's commandments. In this text, God says (through the mouthpiece of Moses): “O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!” (Deut. 5:29). Elaw reports that her daughter was converted “under this discourse,” which electrified the congregation when they learned that the young woman before them being slain in the Spirit was her only child (103). Elaw goes on to explain that she had to balance the natural, personal sympathy she felt for her daughter with her public ministerial role: “Many a mother strongly felt with me on that occasion; and though my position would not allow me to leave the pulpit, to go and pour the oil of consolation into her wounded spirit, yet, thank God, there were abundance of dear friends present who were ready for every good word and work” (103).<sup>22</sup> It is interesting that Elaw felt constrained by her leadership position in this moment, particularly since it was not unusual for a minister to come down from the pulpit to the mourner's bench, “a twenty- or thirty-foot space separating the raised platform of the pulpit from the seated worshippers,” in order to pray with those who were undergoing the transformation from sinner to child of God (Pierce 2005, 101). Perhaps Elaw felt that she needed to continue preaching on the text at hand rather than interrupt her sermon to single her daughter out from among the “listening hundreds” (103). In any case, the many “dear friends” who surrounded and uplifted Elaw's daughter were an integral part of her conversion. Although Elaw reminds her

readers that “the conversion of a soul is not to be effected by the mere effort of man; none but God can communicate a full pardon to the guilty soul,” it is hard not to be impressed by Elaw’s ministrations to her camp meeting congregation and, in turn, their ministrations to her daughter (103). Although the historical Elaw would surely credit the Holy Spirit with her daughter’s conversion, the textual Elaw seems to rise from the page as vital to her daughter’s conversion process. And the friends who surround and uplift Elaw’s daughter become co-performers of conversion, helping to channel all the spiritual energy from God through Elaw to her own daughter in the midst of a big outdoor production—the camp meeting itself—where praying and preaching and performing Spirit-filled exuberance are integral to the appeal of the revival space and the enactment of “adoption” theology.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the collective in this scene, surrounding Elaw’s daughter. As Frey and Wood have suggested in *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*, “For African Americans, if not for all white evangelicals, conversion was often a ritual of collective catharsis and collective commitment that was performed collaboratively” (1998, 123). And as Yolanda Pierce has noted in *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*, camp meetings were particularly provocative spaces for the collective, where interactions between black and white participants could allow for the temporary crumbling of social boundaries (2005, 98-103), particularly at key points in the worship experience such as the “altar call, or call to the mourning bench,” where conversions took place (2005, 101). In contrast to Pierce’s view, Rosetta Renae Haynes argues that Elaw’s description of the camp meeting venue and details actually presents a more egalitarian view than would have been historically accurate, as “in reality...camp meetings replicated the social structures of the larger culture,” including “male dominance and racial inequality” through the physical separation of sexes and/or races in the configuration of seats, etc. (2010, 76). But I agree with Haynes that Elaw’s narrative construction is most important: “What [Elaw] chooses to emphasize and to omit is instructive.... What Elaw does not mention is the hierarchical nature of social relationships within the community. She instead implies that the power of God is capable of eliding social distinctions” (Haynes 2010, 77). In the context of Elaw’s larger theological argument, it is significant that she decides to present the camp meeting as a potentially hierarchy-upending liminal space in her text, a place where equality can be performed within the larger ecumenical body of the Christian church.

Elaw closes this scene in her *Memoirs* by summing her up her daughter’s conversion in phraseology drawn from two of her favorite Pauline verses, saying, “the Spirit of adoption was imparted to [my daughter]; she rejoiced in the Lord with all her soul; and His love was shed abroad in her heart by the Holy Ghost” (103; see Rom. 5:5 and 8:15 [KJV]). Elaw here again invokes “adoption” language to create a singular connection between her life and her text, while also displaying her nuanced grasp of Methodist theological themes. Elaw does not directly mention John Wesley or any of his sermons in her *Memoirs*, but as a Methodist, she would likely have been familiar with his teachings on the Spirit. In his sermon “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” John Wesley puts together the same two scriptures that Elaw uses to discuss her daughter’s conversion (Rom. 5.5 and 8.15), and he reads them as part of a unified, active “Spirit” (1984, 262). The texts of Wesley’s sermons often layer Bible verses fast and thick, and Elaw’s *Memoirs* sometimes have a similar feel, synthesizing many

verses in support of a larger theme. Her theological reach is both striking and subtle, here. Indeed, Elaw bookends her daughter's conversion scene with Pauline language that highlights the Holy Spirit's validation of Christians as God's children. The last sentence prior to her daughter's conversion scene reads: "In all the errands on which the Lord has been graciously pleased to send me for the proclamation of His gospel, my work has been attended with the witness of His Spirit, and He hath given seals to my ministry, and souls for my hire" (103). By using the phrase "witness of His Spirit," Elaw echoes Romans 8:16: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (KJV).<sup>23</sup> Through Elaw's textual construction, her daughter is a definitive "seal" to her ministry, the child of her body who becomes part of the body of Christ. The Pauline language of the "spirit of adoption" becomes a theological through-line across Elaw's text, across her own conversion, sanctification, commission, and ministry, so that Elaw can also inspire others to join the family of God.

### **"One Body and Spirit": Elaw's Vision for the Church**

Through the story of her daughter's conversion, Elaw reveals the radical promise of "adoption" theology. Like all Christians, her daughter is a beneficiary of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants outlined in Genesis, amended in the law given through Moses, and fulfilled in the gospels through Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> The Holy Spirit bears witness to this covenant, freeing believers from the bondage of sin and proclaiming the full potential of what it means to be children of God: "And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8.17a [KJV]). As outlined in commentary on Galatians in *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*, "In the Roman world adoption would have meant that the one adopted had the same rights and privileges as the biological heir. It does not imply second class status" (Dewey et al. 2010, 58). We can compare adoption in the Roman world with what Elaw presents in her *Memoirs*, given that she reminds her readers that there is no distinction in inheritance between her own (biological) daughter and all her other "spiritual children" who are converted by God under her ministrations. All are "joint-heirs with Christ."

The larger argument of Romans is also instructive, here. Paul contends that life in the Spirit is made possible because of the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ through his death on the cross: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2 [KJV]). Romans 5 explains that sin became part of the human condition through "Adam's transgression" (i.e., the Fall), which would lead to death and separation from God (who is holy and cannot tolerate sin) were it not for the "free gift" of grace making eternal life possible through the atonement of Christ's blood (Rom. 5:9, 14-15, 21 [KJV]).<sup>25</sup> The "divine love" Elaw speaks of that allows her to joyously experience the "spirit of adoption" (60) is part of Paul's logic in Romans 5: "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8 [KJV]).

As we have seen, one of the proofs Elaw offers as evidence of the hierarchy-overturning power of God's love is that the Holy Spirit calls both men and women to prophesy and preach (124). Another proof she assembles challenges racial prejudice:

The Almighty accounts not the black races of man either in the order of nature or spiritual capacity as inferior to the white; for He bestows his Holy Spirit on, and dwells in them as readily as in persons of whiter complexion:



the Ethiopian eunuch was adopted as a son and heir of God; and when Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto him [Ps. 68:31], their submission and worship will be graciously accepted. (85)

In this passage, Elaw brings together three biblical references in short succession: Acts 8:26-39 (the story of the Ethiopian eunuch who heard the good news about Jesus from the apostle Philip, was baptized by him, and “went on his way rejoicing”); Romans 8:15-17 (discussed above; “adoption” and “heirs” are the key terms); and Psalms 68:31 (“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” [KJV]; this verse was used countless times during the nineteenth century to support abolition and refute racist interpretations of the Bible such as the idea that blacks descended from Noah’s son, Ham, and through him were cursed to be slaves in Genesis 9 [Wilmore 1983, 119-21]). By juxtaposing these verses, Elaw turns Romans 8:15-17 into a liberatory text in the vein of Galatians 3:26-28 (“For ye are all the *children of God* by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus,” KJV; emphasis added), calling attention to the Holy Spirit as an equalizing force.

Elaw’s antiracist objective in the above passage is so apparent that it requires little further explanation, but it is important to note that this biblical commentary on racial prejudice is prompted by a specific situation in her text. After her husband died, Elaw supported herself and her daughter for two years by filling an institutional void in her hometown of Burlington, New Jersey: she opened a school for black children because “white people refused to admit [black students] into their seminaries” (85). Elaw asserts that her white readers should give up “the pride of white skin” because scripture mandates that they do so, and black readers should be encouraged by the example of the Ethiopian eunuch as a fellow (black) Christian and child of God (85).<sup>26</sup> We can also read this version of adoption—the responsibility that Elaw feels for the black children in her community—through the lens of Patricia Hill Collins’s influential concept of the “othermother”: “Historically, this notion of Black women as community othermothers for all Black children often allowed African-American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families” (2009, 205). As this moment from Elaw’s text suggests, Elaw offers adoption theology (“the Ethiopian eunuch was adopted as a son and heir of God,” [85]) to redress both spiritual and material grievances as she looks out for her immediate community (schoolchildren) and her textual community (her readers, potential spiritual children).

Another example where the spirit of adoption suggests practical applications for Elaw can be found in the portion of her text that addresses her preaching tour in the South. At one point, having just sat down after preaching to a congregation of slaves, Elaw says she was overcome with dread: “Satan suggested to me with such force, that the slave-holders would speedily capture me, as filled me with fear and terror” (91). Elaw’s fears were well-founded: as a free black woman traveling through slave states, she could easily have been kidnapped into slavery. However, knowing that God called her to the mission at hand, Elaw is able to gather herself and ask, “[F]rom whence cometh all this fear?” (91). Rhetorically, this question enables Elaw-the-narrator to show the reader how to cope with practical fears through spiritual strength, explaining, “[M]y confidence in the Lord returned, and I said, ‘get thee behind me Satan, for my Jesus hath made me free’” (91). Using the Pauline framework of “adoption” that Elaw upholds at other moments in her *Memoirs*, we can look at this forceful declaration of

freedom as an extension of the “spirit of adoption” mentioned in Romans 8: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption” (Rom. 8:14-15a, [NRSV]). Again looking at Paul’s overarching argument in Romans, the spirit of adoption drives away fear and takes the place of sin through sanctification (Rom. 6:19, 22, [NRSV]). For Elaw, sanctification, or holiness, is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the child of God that enables her to do amazing things, like preach in dangerous places in dangerous times.

Throughout her *Memoirs*, Elaw teaches her readers to look for the Holy Spirit everywhere, even in unlikely places, by presenting herself as an implausible medium for the Spirit, “so feeble an earthen vessel” who nevertheless enjoys spectacular ministerial success—by the grace of God, of course (92). Proofs of Elaw’s ministry include “persons of every rank in life” (104), black and white, old and young, wealthy and destitute, slaves and slaveholders; some come to listen to her out of “mere curiosity,” wondering whether or not God’s Spirit could really be bestowed on a woman of color (149, 141). Although her appearance might have been novel to some, Elaw explains that her message was straightforward and unremarkable: “[I]n my ministry, I determined to be conversant with no other topic...but Jesus Christ and him crucified” (113-14). However, this uncomplicated message is still a demanding one. For Elaw, faith in Jesus Christ requires believers to live out social justice and reach across spiritual divides, relinquishing sectarian squabbles and other forms of “gospel rivalry” (109). Although she was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Society (58, 61), believed in and taught the importance of the Methodist doctrine of sanctification (68), urged all ministers to “[enjoy] the spirit of adoption” and be sure they were fully “sanctified by the truth [and] purified by obeying it” before calling others to God (114), and regarded Methodist class meetings as the best method of Christian fellowship because they were most similar to meetings of the early Christian church (159), Elaw did not limit herself to the Methodist denomination or preach Methodism as the only way to Christ.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Elaw’s *Memoirs* offer a radically inclusive vision for the church.

Reflecting on a “union prayer-meeting” she once witnessed in Massachusetts where women from multiple Protestant denominations came together to “avow the rich enjoyments they had in the spirit of adoption from God,” Elaw expresses a wish directed toward the British Christian readers she first mentioned in her dedication: “O that the Christian community in Great Britain were all of one heart and one soul” (117). She grounds her desire in additional biblical language: “The Christian church should manifest one fold and one shepherd; one body and spirit; one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; and one God and father of all who is above all, and through all, and in all” (117; see John 10:16 and Eph. 4:4-6). These verses may remind the reader of Elaw’s description of her own baptism earlier in her text (60), where she references 1 Corinthians 12:13: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit” (KJV). Taking this verse together with the other biblical citations Elaw provides in the course of her commentary on the union prayer meeting, her vision for the church is unmistakable (although the metaphors begin to pile up). The “spirit of adoption” brings all Christians together as members of God’s family; that is, members of “one body” (the church) guided by “one shepherd” (Christ).

Elaw carries her vision for the unity of the church to the very end of her *Memoirs*, “believing that there is but one church of Jesus Christ in this wilderness”

(159). In fact, her penultimate paragraph reads like another Pauline epistle, encouraging Christian readers “of every name and denomination” to keep the faith and prepare for Christ’s return, “being the children of the resurrection, the sons of God,” and heirs to the “everlasting kingdom” (159). By giving her final paragraphs the same Pauline feel as her dedication, Elaw subtly alerts her readers to the fact that her message and mission have been consistent throughout the book. She “commend[s] this little volume” to her Christian readers, hoping that the story of her life and ministry will build them up. Elaw seems to imagine her book as a final act of ministry, saying, “these humble memoirs will doubtless continue to be read long after I shall have ceased from my earthly labours and existence” (160). Kimberly Blockett’s recent research has unearthed more information about Elaw’s whereabouts after her *Memoirs* were published in 1846: she got married a second time (to a white man who died after they had been married only four years), and she continued her preaching career in England into at least the 1860s before experiencing some paralysis, dementia, and then death in London in 1873 at about 80 years old (2015, 98). It is powerful to think about Elaw continuing to gather “spiritual children” into the “gospel net” (141), whether through her *Memoirs* or during her lifetime as she continued to preach in England. By testifying to the power of the “spirit of adoption” in her own life and ministry, Elaw showed others how to enjoy the Spirit, too, becoming children of God.

Ultimately, Elaw uses Pauline concepts to organize her *Memoirs* and make challenging theological principles accessible to her readers. But her most revolutionary act may be her impulse to take her own personal encounters with the Holy Spirit and generalize from them to form a universal vision of “adoption” as a crucial part of the gospel message. Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant reminds us that, historically, “universalism” has been considered “the criterion for valid theology,” but that this universalism is largely based on “White experience” and “male experience” (2009, 69). As Grant does, we can apply Alice Walker’s term “womanist” to the lives of nineteenth-century African American preaching women, reading them as proto-womanist theologians who raised their voices and relied on the strength of their own experiences (“womanist means being and acting out who you are and interpreting the reality for yourself,” 2009, 72). But Zilpha Elaw took these strategies one step further by suggesting that the experiences of black women like herself are valid for the interpretation and expansion of theologies that are applicable to all Christians. Elaw clearly meant for her *Memoirs* to have theological staying power, showing the strength of her convictions, of her preaching ability, of her bond with her daughter, and of her relationship with Christ, modeling “adoption” relationships within the larger family of God.

## Notes

I would like to thank Xavier University for a Faculty Development Leave in Fall 2018 that helped me to complete this article.

<sup>1</sup> Martha S. Jones explains, “These path breakers defied convention, speaking publicly without the sanction of male leaders. At the same time, they used the podium and the pulpit to call attention to the contradictions embedded in a public culture that sought to undo discrimination based on race while letting stand differences rationalized through gender” (2007, 7). For an introduction to Jarena Lee and Julia A. J. Foote, see William

L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (1986); for Rebecca Cox Jackson, see Jean McMahon Humez, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (1981); for Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, see Frances Smith Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (1990).

<sup>2</sup> For the concept of "adoption," see Rom. 8:14-15 and 8:23, Gal. 4:4-6, and Eph. 1:4-6. For the metaphor of the church as "one body," see 1 Cor. 12:12-27; also see Eph. 4:4 and Col. 3:15. Biblical citations marked NRSV parenthetically throughout are taken from Michael D. Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Biblical citations marked KJV are from the King James Version.

<sup>3</sup> Elaw's organizational strategies may also suggest a particularly Methodist ethos: Ted A. Campbell notes that Methodist spiritual autobiographies usually contain the same structure of spiritual progress, from pre-conversion life to conversion to "struggles of the soul" to sanctification to the calling to preach (2013, 249).

<sup>4</sup> Some iteration of the phrase "Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" can be found at the beginning of each of Paul's letters, and those that have been attributed to him. For a discussion of the Pauline authorship of various New Testament writings, see Paula Fredriksen (2000, 53).

<sup>5</sup> See 2 Cor. 13:14 (KJV). This benediction is unique among Paul's letters because all three persons of the Holy Trinity are invoked (Coogan et al. 2001, 308 New Testament).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Daniel Shea reminds us to look back even further than Bunyan to earlier precedents: "Since Paul and Augustine, indeed since Pentecost, Christians had evangelized in the first person" (1988, 88). Yolanda Pierce also examines Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus as "the precedent for written conversion narratives" in her introduction to *Hell Without Fires* (2005, 1).

<sup>7</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas notes the radical potential of holiness and experiential religion, explaining, "some African Americans participated in the most prominent holiness and healing organizations and movements of the nineteenth century, particularly the great revivals and camp meetings associated with white religionists. They recognized its significance, especially its power to liberate" (2010, 72).

<sup>8</sup> See Hardesty, "Directly to the Bible" (1999, 53-67); Higginbotham, "Feminist Theology, 1880-1900" (1993, 120-49), and Brekus, "Recovering the History of Female Preaching in America" (1998, especially 6-9).

<sup>9</sup> As William L. Andrews reminds us in his introduction to *Sisters of the Spirit*, "Belief in the Wesleyan version of sanctification freed [Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia A. J. Foote] to trust the promptings of their innermost selves because of their conviction that what came from within was of the Holy Spirit, not the corrupt ego. Thus, these three women exhibited in their lives and their writing a remarkable sense of self-worth, self-confidence, and power, despite the traditional spiritual autobiography's treatment of the self as a deceiving antagonist" (1986, 15).

<sup>10</sup> Using Augustine's *Confessions* as archetype, Geoffrey Galt Harpham argues: "Augustine is converted not when he simply reads the Pauline text...but when he understands that it is a model for himself.... His ambition for his own text is that it takes its place in the chain of imitable texts, speaking to others as he had been spoken to. He hopes that his text will shatter his readers' self-sufficiency as his had been

shattered” (1988, 45). As Elaw’s epigraph suggests, she had a similar hope for her *Memoirs* ([1846] 1986, 49).

<sup>11</sup> As Andrews (the editor) explains in his “Textual Note” for *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (in which Elaw’s *Memoirs* appear), the “bracketed interpolations, e.g., those identifying passages in the Bible, are...the editor’s” (1986, 23-24). I have maintained most of these bracketed biblical citations in key quotations from Elaw’s *Memoirs*, following Andrews’s desire to orient the reader.

<sup>12</sup> In her landmark study, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, Frances Smith Foster puts it like this: “Zilpha Elaw carefully constructs herself as a comely black woman whose economic poverty and political weakness has endowed her with a wealth of spiritual insight and moral power. Elaw’s narrative demonstrates an important feature of African American woman’s literature by asserting the importance of race and gender to definitions and experiences even when neither of those is the focus of the work” (1993, 84-85).

<sup>13</sup> Although I am using Elaw’s diction as evidence for her “contract,” I am indebted to Philippe Lejeune’s conception of the implicit contract, or “autobiographical pact,” between the reader and the “author-narrator-protagonist” whose name (signature) appears on the title page as a testament to the authenticity of the author (1989, 13-14). By invoking the “truth-value” of her text, Elaw participates in one of the most familiar conventions of the autobiographical genre: the presupposition that “information and events reported in connection with the autobiographer are asserted to have been, to be, or to have potential for being the case,” even if said events would be impossible to observe or prove (Bruss 1976, 11).

<sup>14</sup> For information on the various functions of Methodist class meetings in black and biracial churches during the nineteenth century, see Collier-Thomas (2010, 31-32). For more on class meetings within American Methodism, see Hempton (2005, 78-79).

<sup>15</sup> Elaw refers to concepts from 2 Cor. 6:14 (“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?” [KJV]) and Gen. 2:18 (“And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” [KJV]).

<sup>16</sup> Elaw’s desire to surrender everything to God was echoed by other holiness women during the nineteenth century. Following theologian Diane Cunningham Leclerc, Susie Stanley points out that Phoebe Palmer—one of the most influential proponents of holiness during the nineteenth century, a key evangelist, thinker, and writer on the doctrine of Christian perfection—made sure to put God first, “laying all on the altar [including] her children and her husband. This did not mean she would no longer love them, but rather that love for them would not surpass her love for God” (Stanley 2002, 82). For more on Phoebe Palmer’s “altar” theology circa the 1840s, see Palmer, “Lay Your All upon the Altar” (1995, 230-31), Hardesty (1999, 40-41), Stanley (2002, 71-73), and Raser (1987; 36, 159-161, 171-173).

<sup>17</sup> Due to “the divine voice absent the visible image, the engulfing light, and the inclusion of a third party external to the revelatory event,” theologian Mitzi J. Smith reads this moment in Elaw’s narrative as a “conceptual and linguistic” parallel to the Apostle Paul’s Damascus Road experience from the book of Acts (2011, 298).

<sup>18</sup> If the hymn fragments Elaw intersperses in her *Memoirs* are any indicator, Charles Wesley was her favorite hymnodist. Charles Wesley referenced the prodigal son

fourteen times in his extant sermons (Tyson 1989, 487). For another of his extended meditations on the prodigal son, see the hymn “Of Thanksgiving to the Father” (Tyson 1989, 121-22).

<sup>19</sup> For an interesting reading of Elaw’s use of Pauline language in this scene, see Mitzi J. Smith (2011, 304).

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of spirit possession as a legacy from West Africa, see Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (1978). Drawing on Raboteau and others, Yolanda Pierce claims, “the centrality of women as ritual leaders within African religious tradition found an echo in the prominence of black female believers like Zilpha Elaw as exhorters within the revival setting” (2005, 104).

<sup>21</sup> According to Hymnary.org, this hymn, “Praise God for What He’s Done for Me,” was first published in *A Collection of Revival Hymns, Adapted to Popular Airs* (1844)—author unknown.

<sup>22</sup> Lest we be tempted to read this moment of “feeling” as analogous to sentimental fiction where the narrator guides the reader-who-is-also-a-mother toward proper moral response (*a lá* Harriet Beecher Stowe), it is important to note here that emphasizing “feeling” allows Elaw to testify to the power of her own preaching. The ability to inspire intense feeling, particularly ecstatic emotional reaction with physical manifestation, was a hallmark of the camp meeting worship experience for Methodists (Turner 2013, 122-23).

<sup>23</sup> Elaw could also be alluding to 1 John 5:6, but the underlying theme is similar in both verses.

<sup>24</sup> Elaw is cognizant of each of these stages of the covenant. She describes “one of the seals to [her] ministry” as “a descendent of Abraham, according to the flesh—a Jew outwardly, who, believing in the Lord with the heart unto righteousness, became a Jew inwardly also” ([1846] 1986, 155). For the biblical basis for this statement, see Rom. 4, 9:4-5, and 11.

<sup>25</sup> Paul puts the argument of Rom. 5:12-21 more succinctly in 1 Cor. 15:22 (KJV): “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

<sup>26</sup> The Ethiopian eunuch is a figure Elaw cites multiple times in her *Memoirs*. For an interesting reading of the Ethiopian eunuch as part of Elaw’s discourse of “lack,” see Douglass-Chin (2001, 53-55).

<sup>27</sup> Elaw did not preach under the auspices of any one denomination or on particular circuits. As she explains, God alone directed her path (“the privilege of self-direction the Lord did not permit so ignorant and incompetent a servant as I was, to exercise,” [1846] 1986, 102) and provided for her monetary needs (134). Teresa C. Zackodnik states, “preaching women arguably reached more potential converts outside the church’s formal structure than they would have had they been licensed by a denomination or given a pastorate” (2011, 2). For more on early-nineteenth-century sects who tried to emulate the early Christian church, see Brekus (1998, 155).

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