

Jarena Lee 1783–1849

Forbidden to Speak

Jarena Lee's parents were a free black couple in Cape May, New Jersey. Like many poor people of all races, when their daughter was seven, they hired her out as a domestic servant to a white family living sixty miles away. Jarena taught herself to read and write, and she was



Jarena Lee, 1849. *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: giving an account of her call to preach the gospel*, frontispiece. Engraving. New-York Historical Society Library, CT.L4784 A3 1849.

deeply spiritual, even as a child. Years later, she still regretted that her parents had not provided her with religious teaching, the area where she devoted her life. At around

age 20, Jarena moved to Philadelphia and searched for a church that suited her. She felt out of place until she arrived at a black church and heard the preaching of Richard Allen. She was baptized in 1807 at age 24.

Soon after, Jarena felt called to preach, and asked Reverend Allen for permission. He said that she could respond from the congregation, but only men could preach. Most Protestant churches had a similar policy based on the Bible: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak.” Later, when she published her spiritual autobiography, she reflected on this disappointing moment: “If the man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Savior, instead of a half one?”

For the time being, Jarena put aside her thoughts of preaching. In 1811, newly married, she moved with her husband to New Jersey. By 1817, her husband and four of their six children had died. She returned to Philadelphia and Reverend Allen, who had just founded the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. The rules against women preaching had not changed, but Jarena had a profound religious experience and began to preach without permission. She was so powerful that Reverend Allen relented. Jarena became the first authorized female preacher in the A.M.E church. She began to travel many miles a day, often on foot, to preach to assembled crowds.



Hugh Bridport, *Camp Meeting*, ca. 1829. Lithograph. New-York Historical Society Library, PR 68.

The Second Great Awakening

Jarena Lee was part of a broad spiritual movement that stretched from the 1790s to the 1840s. Later called the Second Great Awakening, it peaked in the 1820s, as Jarena began her missionary work. Historians have identified other “great awakenings” in American history. They were periods of intense religious fervor within Protestant churches, of revival meetings, often on a huge scale, and of conversions by the thousands. The Second Great Awakening was important

because it linked religion, moral reform, and the lives of women just as the nation was contending with deep inequalities in American life. Throughout the country, most of the people at religious revivals, and most of the converts, were women. Most of the men were their husbands and sons.

People flocked especially to the newer Protestant sects. The Methodists and Baptists were the most popular, and competed for new converts. Jarena Lee reported on one trip to southern New York State, where she preached and held

Jarena Lee 1783–1849 *continued*

prayer meetings over several days. “We had the victory,” she wrote, “as there were twenty-one persons joined from that revival.” The Baptists, working the same ground, had won only five.

Changing Minds

The Second Great Awakening, like the American Revolution, was a popular rebellion against dogma and the rule of the elite. One of its central ideas was that common people—including the poor, the uneducated, black people, and women—could find salvation. And God could choose any one of them to preach. These were optimistic, democratic ideas about human nature and religion, and they helped Jarena Lee become a preacher. But they also reinforced women’s belief that they were morally superior, and needed to put that morality to good use. Many applied their energies to reform movements favoring temperance, abolition, and women’s rights.

One study found about a hundred female preachers during the Second Great Awakening. Most were white, but Jarena Lee—and Sojourner Truth—were African American women who traveled and preached. Regardless of race or gender, itinerant preachers drew eager, sometimes enormous, crowds. Jarena Lee would preach to any group of listeners, but she sought out African Americans, and usually spoke to a few dozen people at most. She

preached wherever she could: in homes, schools, open fields. Most people, she reported, were kind. They gave her rides, places to sleep, meals, a little cash, and she needed it all. Male preachers received a small salary, but the women were unpaid.

Early in her career, Jarena Lee fought for her right to preach. Neither she nor other female preachers set out to unseat male ministers, or fundamentally change their churches. In that sense, they were not reformers. But reform is a slow, subtle process that gradually changes the way people think. Those who heard Jarena Lee witnessed something that had been forbidden, and yet they were won over. She wrote of one revival in a small town in western New York State, where she preached and gained many converts, and “they all marveled at a woman taking such a deep subject.”

Sources: Catherine A. Brekus, “Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth-Century America.” The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2009, <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/98759.pdf> (accessed by M. Waters, 11-18-2016); Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, 1849).

Discussion Questions

- ★ What challenges did Jarena Lee face in pursuing her passions? How did she overcome them?
- ★ What made the Second Great Awakening a radical social movement?
- ★ How was Jarena Lee treated differently from male itinerant preachers?
- ★ Why is Jarena Lee’s story important?