Gifts of Power

The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress

Edited with an introduction by

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Introduction

There was no mortal that I could go to and gain instruction,
so it pleased God in His love and mercy
to teach me in dreams and visions and revelation and gifts.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS of Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795–1871), which appear here in print for the first time, are centrally concerned with how religious vision and ecstatic experience functioned for her and other women of her time as a source of personal power, enabling them to make radical change in the outward circumstances of their lives.[1] Born just outside Philadelphia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jackson was a free black woman, a seamstress, a married woman immersed in family life. Her religious experience was to propel her irreversibly out of her settled condition and into a forty-year public career, first as a preacher and later as the founder of a black Shaker community in her city.

Jackson owed the impulse to commit the details of her spiritual life to paper, as well as the drive to acquire the skills of literacy as a middle-aged adult, to her profound conviction that she was a chosen instrument for revealing the will of God. In these writings, she believed, as in her life itself, the divine purpose would be expressed: "I am only a pen in His hand," she wrote. Interior experience occupies the foreground. She barely mentions the facts of her life prior to the transforming experience of spiritual rebirth that set her on her pilgrimage as a "new creature" at the age of thirty-five in 1830. Yet, while recording interior experience, she also was able to throw tantalizing, fitful illumination on the religious ideologies and institutions with which she was associated in her unusual career—primarily the independent black Methodist churches of the North before the Civil War, and the utopian Shaker communities at the height of their prosperity, half a century after their founding.

As modern readers, we may regret the underemphasis on the secular life in these writings. But like many other women who wrote spiritual autobiography in England, Europe, and America from the seventeenth

1. See "A Note on the Text" for a description of the manuscript sources of this volume and of editorial procedures.

through the nineteenth century, if Rebecca Jackson had not felt herself literally compelled to write about what God had done for and through her, she would certainly never have written at all. She recorded what she believed were manifestations of a sacred force, which came into her from the outside. The force could be relied upon for protection, guidance, instruction, and joy precisely because it was so much more powerful than any human being was. In an apparent paradox familiar in religious thought, Jackson's denial of the importance of her individual self enabled her to make the strongest possible assertion of the power and reality of her inner sources of strength and knowledge.

Jackson's writings show with unusual clarity that her powers of the religious imagination, her skills as an ecstatic and visionary, were to a very significant extent under her control. In part through her use of traditional ascetic techniques of self-mortification, she invited the "gifts" or supernatural experiences of various kinds that gave her power over the destructive, menacing forces she confronted, both inside herself and in the outside world. Far from "retreating" or "escaping" into the realm of visionary trance, she capably employed vision for her own self-protection and education. Spiritual experience was all the more important because access to other kinds of power—through schooling, wealth, social status, or participation in civic and public political life—was denied to her as a black woman in antebellum America.

"MY BURDEN ROLLED OFF": THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF A FREE BLACK METHODIST WOMAN

Evangelical religion nurtured female and black self-development in complex ways in preindustrialized America. Historians of the great social reform movements of the nineteenth century have shown that ultimately political liberationist movements like abolitionism and feminism were deeply rooted in the successive layers of religious enthusiasm that spread out over the northeastern United States in the first four decades of the century. In the revivals of the Second Great Awakening, many women gained experience in public speaking for the first time, under a religious obligation to testify to the operations of divine grace on their souls. Experiencing equality at a fundamental level in the religious realm, some would be led to demand it in the civic realm as well. Moreover, the conviction that human institutions, like human souls, could be reformed, even "perfected," by human effort under benevolent divine guidance was a prerequisite for the outburst of moral and social reform activity of the 1820s and 1830s. This work in turn nurtured abolitionism and, later,

the women's rights movement. The idea that women might be not only equal but even superior workers in the moral reform area, though based on a conviction that sex differences were immutable, still led women to try their powers in organizing for public reforms. Working side by side with men of similar religious and social views, some came to question and challenge the doctrine of the appropriate separate "spheres" of the two sexes. Many middle-class women who went on to do overtly political work, as abolitionists or suffragists, then, did so in part because of the impetus provided by the ideology of religion and the personal and group experiences they derived from working in church-based organizations.

Even the great majority of religious American women caught up by revivals who did not make such a transition into political work probably experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, a deep sense of personal renewal and increased self-respect and autonomy as a result of the emotional upheaval of evangelical conversion. For women, an increased sense of autonomy meant at least an implicit challenge to male domination, both in family relationships and in the formal church organizations. Nancy F. Cott suggests that the young, white, middle-class New England woman who was converted during one of these revivals probably derived a complex satisfaction from establishing a new, intense relationship with God:

> The submission required of those who were to be saved was consistent with female socialization, but this submission was also an act of initiation and assertion of strength by female converts. Conversion set up a direct relation to God's authority that allowed female converts to denigrate or bypass man's authority—to defy man—for God.[2]

There are some important similarities between white women's potential experience of conversion as personal liberation and that of blacks who were converted in great numbers under Methodist preaching in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. American Methodism, in its very early days, welcomed black converts on an equal basis with whites. In emphasizing the role of lay preachers, sticking to the "plain and simple Gospel," and encouraging "spiritual extempore preaching," in the phrase of Richard Allen, Methodism did not set up barriers to full participation in its meetings and leadership structure by slaves or un-

2. Nancy F. Cott, "Young Women in the Second Great Awakening in New England," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (fall 1975): 21. See "A Note on Bibliography" for other recent studies of American women's experience with evangelical religious revivals.

lettered free blacks, as did other American churches of the period.[3] Moreover, the experience of being filled with the divine Spirit, essential for Methodist conversion, could empower the victim of systematic social oppression through assurance of a direct personal connection with ultimate authority. Knowledge of this access to God offered increased pride and self-respect. The Christian gospel as interpreted by pioneer Methodist circuit preachers promised a righting of social wrongs, an overturning in time or eternity of unjust social relations, a punishment for oppressors. The Methodist movement also provided the basis for close social associations for free blacks beyond the family, both in the smaller, participatory unit of the weekly class meetings and in the larger, more hierarchical church organization.[4]

What might it have meant specifically for a free black Methodist woman like Rebecca Jackson to experience conversion and the call to preach during this period? Many of the most striking aspects of her early religious experience are shared by three other black women preachers with a Methodist background whose autobiographies were published in the nineteenth century: Elizabeth, Jarena Lee, and Amanda Smith. A brief look at some of the common concerns and experiences described in these writings will suggest how Jackson's spiritual life might have been rooted in her heritage, how it might specifically relate to aspects of her identity as a black Methodist woman. The writings of all four emphasize, to one degree or another, a concern with attaining to a special level of holiness, a kind of salvation in life; the experience of gradually developing religious leadership skills within small prayer groups, predominantly or entirely female in membership; the struggle, as women, with male opposition to their ministry within the black independent churches; and the reliance on supernatural gifts as a source of power, wisdom, and authority not only in daily life but in attaining to a career as a religious leader.[5]

3. The phrases quoted are from African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church founder Richard Allen's autobiography, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen,* 2nd ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 30.

4. The argument for the liberationist appeal of evangelical religion for blacks is skillfully made by Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 67, 79, 185–236.

5. These autobiographies are: *Elizabeth: A Colored Minister of the Gospel Born in Slavery* (Philadelphia: Tract Society of Friends, 1889); Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving An Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel . . .* (Philadelphia, 1849); and Amanda Smith, *Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (Chicago: Meyer, 1893). I am indebted to David W. Wills for allowing me to read in unpublished form his paper, "Womanhood and Domesticity in the A.M.E. Tradition: The Influence of Daniel Alexander Payne," forthcoming in Richard Newman and David W. Wills, *Afro-American Religious Leaders at Home and Abroad* (New York: G. K. Hall). This study helped me to crystallize my own view of this conflict between women preachers and the rising A.M.E. church leadership in this period. For excerpts from the first two autobiographies, which cover the period prior to and during Jackson's early career, see the Appendix, "Female Preaching and the A.M.E. Church, 1820–1852."

Like her sister autobiographers, as well as many other devout black and white Methodist women before the Civil War, Rebecca Jackson was a believer in "sanctification," a second experience of divine grace in the soul following conversion. According to the Holiness current in Methodist thought and practice, the individual experienced "justification" at conversion—the conviction that her sins were forgiven and she was "made just" through Christ's love. There was a state of blessedness beyond justification, however, called sanctification. To be sanctified was to experience full freedom from "intentional sin"—the liability, to which all fallen humanity was heir, to commit sins in full knowledge that they were sins. As early as the 1820s and 1830s, small, enthusiastic Holiness praying groups had sprung up within Methodism, with the explicit purpose of encouraging members to seek this second, higher, heartfelt experience of divine grace. Although no complete figures are available, most accounts of the Holiness movement suggest that it, like evangelical religious experience in general in nineteenth-century America, was from the outset a predominantly female affair, growing even more disproportionately attractive to women as the century advanced. The autobiographies of these black Methodist women, as well as other records, indicate that Holiness had a particularly strong appeal for black women, at least in the pre–Civil War period. That the joyful sense of complete personal security, of attaining to sanctification in life, could be of great psychological value for a woman who had to deal daily with white racism is suggested by Amanda Smith's comment, "I think some people would understand the quintessence of sanctifying grace if they could be black about twenty-four hours." Smith explicitly recorded her experience of liberation from her fear of whites, immediately after her sanctification

in 1868.[6] Rebecca Jackson's religious experience also was to include winning freedom from internalized aspects of racial oppression, though the process was not so instantaneous in her case.

Predominantly or entirely female "praying bands" were an early and continuing phenomenon of black Methodism in America and were the original unit of the Holiness movement. The writings of all four of the autobiographers show that testifying to spiritual experience in these small groups, meeting weekly at the homes of their members, encouraged substantial numbers of devout black Methodist women to think of preaching to larger audiences. In these relatively intimate, highly participatory, democratic religious gatherings, in the familiar private world of women friends, spiritual talents and speaking skills were developed and protected. Given the suspicion or hostility that a woman's public religious leadership evoked outside of these circles, from the independent black church leaders and some congregations, it seems likly that the female praying bands were of the utmost importance in preparing a woman for a career as a speaker and minister—despite the rivalries and jealousies that also sometimes occurred within these groups.

As with her involvement in Holiness prayer meetings, Rebecca Jackson's visionary and supernatural abilities—her "gifts"—were a part of her heritage as a black Methodist woman; similar experiences are mentioned in the autobiographies of Elizabeth, Jarena Lee, and Amanda Smith.[7] It should be emphasized that black Methodist women were not alone in experiencing symbolic and prophetic dreams, premonitions or "gifts of foresight," guidance in daily actions by inner, audible voices, waking visions, and other phenomena that could be interpreted as purposeful interventions by the divine in one's daily life. Religious black

6. Amanda Smith, *Autobiography*, pp. 73–80, 117. For an overview of female involvement in the Holiness movement, which unfortunately does not discuss black women's participation separately, see Nancy Hardesty et al., "Women in the Holiness Movement: Feminism in the Evangelical Tradition," in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, eds., *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 226–54. A recent essay by James S. Tinney of the Department of Journalism, School of Communications, Howard University, "The Feminist Impulse in Black Pentecostalism," suggests that black women, in particular, took responsibility for maintaining specifically African religious practices, first under slavery, and then, despite systematic efforts on the part of black Methodism and Baptism to suppress these practices, carried them into the nineteenth-century Holiness movement and on into twentieth-century Pentecostalism.

7. See the excerpts from Elizabeth's and Jarena Lee's autobiographies, in the Appendix, for instances of their spiritual gifts.

men also had visions and dreams that guided their actions—best known from this period is Nat Turner, the visionary slave who led a rebellion guided by vivid spiritual experience.[8] And, of course, nineteenth-century Protestants in general, black and white, female and male, often looked for and found tangible evidence of divine favor of this sort—perhaps especially on the frontiers of white settlements, and especially in times of religious revival. Countless novels, stories, autobiographical documents, and folklore evidences attest to the prominence and variety of supernatural events and experience in nineteenth-century American folk religion. Though not unique to them, then, the Holiness-oriented praying bands of black women of this period were probably one important setting among many, in which women encouraged each other to display, discuss, compare, and expect a rich range of divine gifts. The spiritual fellowship with other black women, perhaps as much as the individual's own ecstatic experiences themselves, would have meant a great deal to participants. A voluntary association with one's peers, in pursuit of spiritual light and power, would have contrasted sharply with the severely restricted choices and activities available in many free black women's working and family lives.[9]

8. Turner's account of his visions was recorded by a white attorney who visited him before he was hanged. See Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), pp. 120–25. The autobiographies of Richard Allen and Daniel Peterson may be more typical of black male Methodist clerics of this period in that they do not detail their spiritual experience—except for one fairly "composed" or clearly allegorical prophetic dream by Daniel Peterson, which justifies his decision to leave his family and pursue a career as an itinerant antislavery preacher; see Daniel H. Peterson, *The Looking-Glass: Being a True Report and Narrative of the Life, Travels, and Labors of the Rev. Daniel H. Peterson, A Colored Clergyman . . .* (New York: Wright, 1854), pp. 23–25.

9. For plentiful evidence that nominally free black women of this period experienced double sets of restrictions on their work opportunities on account of race and sex, see the 1848 survey of black women's employment in Philadelphia, summarized in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899; rpt. New York: Schocken, 1967), p. 142. Domestic servitude for both black women and black men must have taken its toll on free black family life, in many instances, as well. It would be misleading to imply that the major source of black female religiosity was emotional and material deprivation, however. Jackson's own writings, as well as those of two of her sister autobiographers/preachers excerpted in the Appendix, very clearly show the intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic pleasures of a highly participatory, spiritualistic religious life. For discussion of the controversial question of the extent to which aspects of African religious

Given the traditions shared with her sister Holiness Methodists, and some common experiences as women seeking religious leadership roles in a male-dominated church, Rebecca Jackson's visionary writings and career as a religious leader are still unusual in important ways. Again the autobiographies of Elizabeth, Lee, and Smith help point to the differences. Most distinctive is the extraordinary detail of the portrait Rebecca Jackson was able to draw of her visionary and spiritual experience. The other three women integrate relatively brief descriptions of vision, dream, or other gifts into narratives dealing primarily with their external lives. Jackson reverses these proportions and immerses herself and the reader of her autobiography in spiritual experience. This ability is a function of the unusual intensity and single-mindedness of Jackson's commitment to a life of vision, it would seem—her power of concentrating on this one realm of experience, to the virtual exclusion of all others.

Jackson also differed in at least two important respects from the other Methodist women preachers in her private circumstances at the time she responded to the divine call to religious leadership. First she alone was a married woman when she began her public career. Elizabeth does not mention a husband; and although Jarena Lee and Amanda Smith were both married for short periods to African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) preacher-husbands, both were widows, with relatively manageable child-care responsibilities, when they decided to move from prayer meetings to public preaching. Rebecca Jackson had also lived several years in the household of an A.M.E. preacher—though in her case it was her brother. Jackson did not wait, however, until she was widowed to strike out on her own. As a result, Jackson's writings, alone in this group of sources, give some indication of the conflict a married religious woman felt when her sense of duty as a Christian wife clashed with her need to put herself entirely at the disposal of the inner power that transformed her. Jackson's conflict with her male family members, her husband and brother, had a central role in shaping both her outward, public career and the development of some of her religious ideas.

Perhaps related to this first important difference in Jackson's circumstances is a second one, a difference in her fundamental orientation toward human relationships and the social world. Elizabeth, Lee, and

practices, adapted to the Christian evangelical framework, were a part of the heritage of experiential religion that Methodist praying bands were seeking to preserve, see the sources listed in "A Note on Bibliography."

Smith all traveled, preached, and wrote as essentially single individuals, although they seem to have enjoyed the support of spiritual sisters, some family members (though at a distance), and some brother ministers as well. Jackson stands out from this pattern in two ways. After breaking with her husband and brother, she lived and traveled throughout the rest of her life in close relationship with a single cherished, intimate woman friend who shared her religious ideas. Perhaps, had she been born in the modern age, she would have been an open lesbian.[10]

At the same time, Jackson was atypical in the efforts she made throughout her adult life to find an ideal community, a spiritual "family" that would integrate her religious life and her personal and social relationships into a seamless, shining fabric. She pressed beyond the personal assurance of "sanctification" to look for holiness embodied in communal relationships and institutions.

Given the intensity and purism of her yearnings for perfection, in herself and in her environment, it is not surprising to find, in Rebecca Jackson's writings, that she was repeatedly disappointed, in individuals and in groups that failed to live up to their ideals in practice. A modern reader who shares the ideals, indeed, will sometimes find Jackson herself disappointing. Struggling as she was with anger and fear in more or less conscious ways, she occasionally took refuge in an embattled self-righteousness, which, though perhaps unavoidable in the context of the

10. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (1975): 1–29, for a discussion of what Smith-Rosenberg has termed "female homosocial networks" in this period, largely among middle-class white women. More directly applicable to Jackson's milieu is Tinney's assertion in "Feminist Impulse" that "the long-standing practice of women preachers living together and pastoring in pairs . . . in Pentecostalism . . . created an often-vocalized belief among male preachers that the Pentecostal women preachers were closeted lesbians." Rebecca Jackson's writings offer very little direct evidence either to support or to contradict the theory that there was an acknowledged sexual component in her relationship with her lifelong disciple and companion, Rebecca Perot. That the love they felt for each other helped make heterosexual relationships unnecessary for either seems very clear, but both also subscribed to an antisexual ideology. The now substantial and growing body of research on lesbian history and culture is surveyed by Blanche Wiesen Cook in "'Women Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbianism and the Cultural Traditions," *Signs* 4, 4 (1979: 718–39. For ground-breaking writing on black lesbian lives, past and present, see Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, eds., *Conditions: Five. The Black Women's Issue* 2, 2 (1979).

immense effort she was making to change herself, nonetheless can give a reader considerable sympathy with those she rejected.[11]

She was a complex personality, and her historical and spiritual experience was correspondingly complex. The evidence that exists for her situation and feelings at the end of her life, when she had at last succeeded in establishing her own religious community, a Shaker "family" composed mostly of black (and some white) women, is regrettably fragmentary. But it does not suggest embitterment, frustration, or a sense of failure. On the contrary, despite illness and continuing inner struggle, Jackson is last glimpsed living among those who respected her and shared her understanding of the world, doing the work she felt called to. Her writings enable us to look closely at the process by which this unusual woman, using Evangelical Christian ideology, expression, and ascetic traditions, tapped sources of strength within herself to become the founder of such a community.

"THOU CAN HAVE POWER OVER THY OWN BODY": JACKSON'S EARLY CAREER

According to the sketchy biographical information that can be collected from allusions in her writings, Rebecca Cox Jackson was the daughter of a woman, maiden name unknown, who was married at least twice, probably three times, before dying in 1808. Nothing is known of Jackson's father. The oldest of the Cox siblings, Joseph (b. 1778?, d. 1843), was to figure prominently in Jackson's life and writings. Two other Cox siblings, John and Jane, apparently older, are mentioned only once, in an account of a dream from her childhood.

Rebecca Cox lived with her grandmother (never named) from infancy until she was between three and four years old. This suggests the death of her father at around the time of her birth and her mother's

11. The clearest example of this unacknowledged anger is in Jackson's account of her brother's son's death. She emphasizes the boy's sinfulness, the father's almost criminal spiritual negligence of his family, and her own goodness and effectiveness as an exhorter who can convert the boy on his deathbed. She seems to suppress with some difficulty her satisfaction in describing her brother's surprise as he finally realizes his son is dying. However, Jackson's honesty about her struggles with her "natural propensity" for vengeance helps redeem her occasional lapses in self-knowledge and charity. Moreover, the view she took of her role in the cosmic scheme of things made it imperative, from her point of view as a chronicler of God's doings, to portray those who opposed her mission with some fierceness.

consequent inability to care for the children while working to support them. By the time Rebecca was six, she was again living with her mother, now remarried and named Jane Wisson (or Wilson); a stepfather, a sailor, died at sea at this time, and the next year, when Rebecca was seven, her much-beloved grandmother died. By the time Rebecca was ten, she was living in a Philadelphia apartment with her mother and a younger sister and infant brother, the offspring, it seems, of a third marriage. Rebecca was probably solely responsible for caring for these younger siblings while her mother worked during the day. Without this responsibility, Rebecca would probably have had an opportunity, however limited, for some schooling, since her mother saw to it that all of her other children had some "learning."

From the time of her mother's death, when Rebecca was thirteen, until the opening of her autobiography twenty-two years later, almost nothing is known of Rebecca Cox's life. Probably she was taken in immediately by her brother Joseph, eighteen years her senior. At some point she married a man named Samuel S. Jackson. Almost certainly they had no children.

In 1830, at the time the autobiography opens, Jackson's external situation might seem to have been one of relative prosperity and safety—certainly so when compared with that of the majority of black women alive in antebellum America. She was not a slave, nor, apparently, were any members of her family. She lived in Philadelphia, a northern city that had a substantial and growing free black community, with proliferating networks of religious, social, and beneficent institutions controlled by themselves (figs. 1 and 2). Moreover, she had the seeming advantage of living in her older brother's household, rather than in the house of a white employer, for example, as so many free black women in antebellum Philadelphia did. She worked as a seamstress and probably controlled her own income,[12] though she was also married to an employed

12. Dressmaking was probably a relatively highly skilled and respected occupation among those open to black women at the time, although wages were still very low in absolute terms. According to David Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial City," in Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Better, eds., *Urban America in Historical Perspective* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1970), "while female operatives in Philadelphia earned two or three dollars a week in the 1820s, seamstresses rarely surpassed $1.25" (p. 109). Jackson's retention of control over her own earnings and property is suggested in the account of a visionary experience during a paralytic illness. Thinking she is dying, she gives her husband as much information about her "affairs" as she thinks he will need to know when she is dead.

husband who lived with her in her brother's house. This brother, Joseph Cox, was a pillar of the powerful Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church of Philadelphia (fig. 3) and held a variety of church-related offices, in addition to that of local preacher and elder, during the 1820s and 1830s.[13] Cox was apparently a widower at the time, and

13. See the "Glossary of Proper Names." Cox was handsomely eulogized by Bishop Daniel A. Payne in *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1891; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1969) for his "mental power" and memorable preaching. "His mind was vigorous and capable of mastering any subject to which he determined to devote his attention. . . . Though not educated, in the popular sense of the term, yet he had greatly enriched his mind by various reading and patient reflec-

Figure 1. Philadelphia in 1836

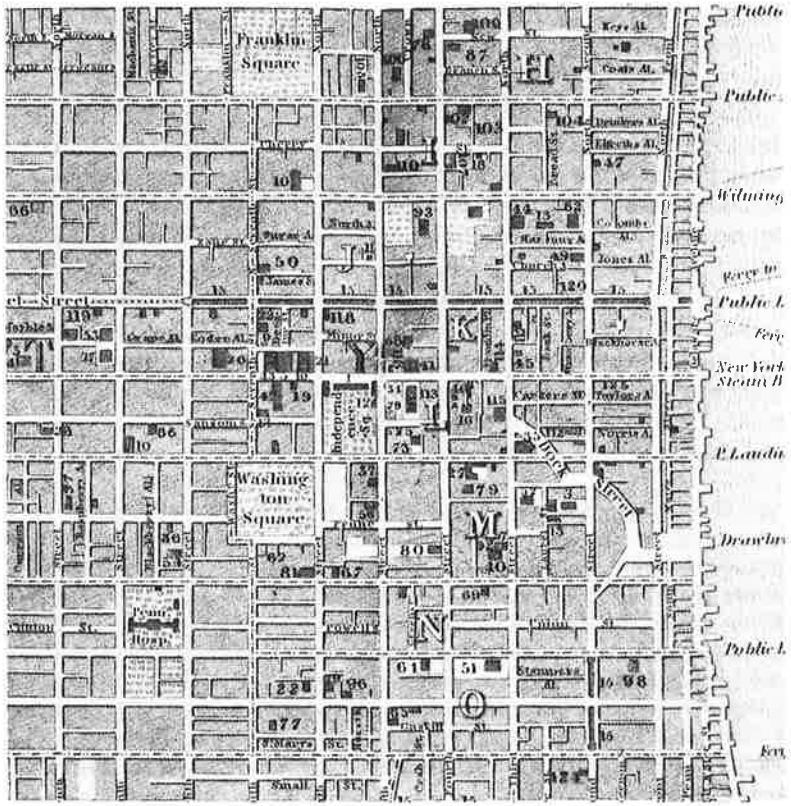
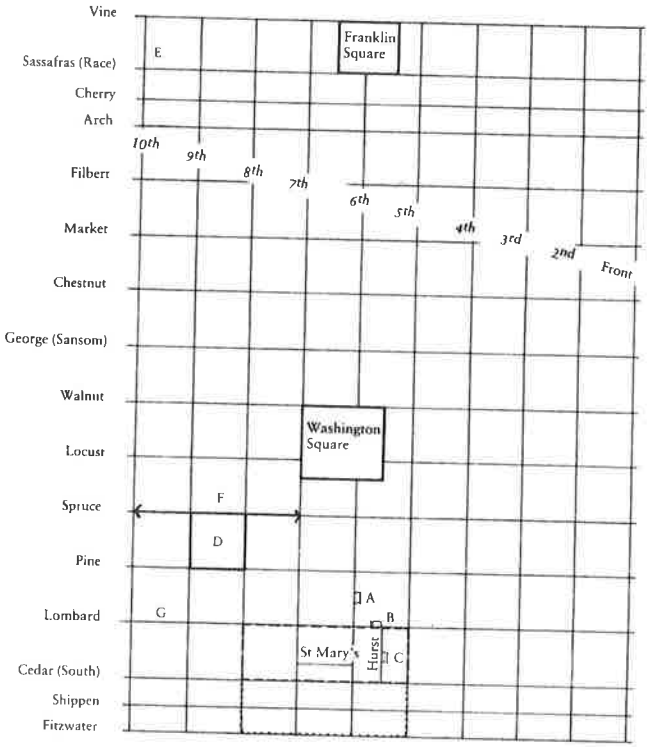


Figure 2. Rebecca Jackson's Philadelphia



A Bethel A.M.E. Church, Sixth Street
B Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church ("Big Wesley")
C Little Wesley Church, Hurst Street
D City Hospital, Pine (between Eighth and Ninth)
E Rebecca Cox residence at age ten (Tenth and Race)
F Rebecca Perot's neighborhood, in dream of 1850 (Spruce, between Seventh and Tenth)
G 1878 location of Philadelphia Shakers (914 Lombard)

– – – Nearly one-half of the black population lived in this neighborhood in 1790 (DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*)
. . . Moyamensing district (a crowded slum by 1847, according to DuBois)

Jackson, herself childless, had the responsibility of caring for his four resident children and for supervising the housekeeping. Thus, in her midthirties, Jackson had a good degree of economic security and independence, lived with a large, extended family, and had connections

tion. As for native eloquence, he had no superior in his day. . . . He repeatedly moved a congregation of two thousand souls; and this was not the effect of ranting, but the legitimate result of a soul inspired with the sublimity and importance of the great theme of salvation" (pp. 177–78).

through her brother to one of the most important free black institutions of her time.

A very different picture of Jackson's internal situation is presented in her dreams from this early period. One of these in particular, "A Dream of Slaughter" (p. 94), offers an important clue to the emotional context in which her dramatic conversion experience makes fullest sense. In this dream, Jackson found herself left alone in the house of a family she sewed for. A robber arrived and began to skin and eviscerate her like a beast of slaughter. She felt utterly powerless to defend herself against this cruelly dehumanizing physical attack by an armed man.

The fear of sudden, irrational violence, attack, mutilation, that is expressed in this dream and many others throughout her writings may very possibly have a personal, private side, unrelated to race. Yet it must also have roots in the growing tensions that produced the explosions of white mob violence against black Philadelphians, beginning in 1829 and reoccurring in 1834, 1835, 1842, and 1849. These outbreaks of virulent racism were caused, in W. E. B. Du Bois's judgment, by "the simultaneous influx of freedmen, fugitives, and foreigners into a large city, and the resulting prejudice, lawlessness, crime and poverty. The agitation of the Abolitionists was the match that lighted this fuel."[14] These attacks went on for several days at a time, causing injuries, destruction of homes, churches, and other property in black neighborhoods—even some deaths. Later in the decade, in 1838, Pennsylvania Hall, built for holding mass antislavery meetings, was burned by a white mob (see fig. 4). The Bethel A.M.E. Church was damaged and a black orphanage destroyed. During the series of mob attacks on black homes in 1835, as Du Bois records it, "the whole of the afternoon of that day black women and children fled the city." It is hard to see how any black person living in Philadelphia during these years could have escaped feeling terror and rage, whether circumstances allowed for the expression of these feelings or not.

Only fifty years earlier, in Jackson's mother's day, Philadelphia had been a relatively safe and even attractive place for newly freed blacks to live. In part, this was because of its historical association with the Quaker opposition to the slave trade and to slavery itself. Pennsylvania had passed a Gradual Abolition Law in 1780, and in 1790, five years before

14. Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro,* p. 27. This excellent study provides a detailed history of the worsening legal and economic position of free blacks in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania during these years, as well as valuable statistics on employment, education, and the development of independent free black institutions.

Jackson's birth, the Constitutional Convention of Pennsylvania had refused to restrict the suffrage to white males. In the city, many free blacks had trades, and some had started businesses in the late eighteenth century. A Quaker school for black children, founded in 1770, had an enrollment of 414 in 1813.[15] During Rebecca Jackson's girlhood and young womanhood, however, racial discrimination against the fast-growing free black population became increasingly blatant, in churches, in public transportation, in employment, and finally in civic life as well. Free black male propertyholders enjoyed the right to vote in Pennsylvania only until 1838, when the word "white" was added to the state constitution.

Against this background of increasing, violent white racism in Philadelphia, Rebecca Jackson's religious awakening experience took place, during a severe thunderstorm in July 1830. As she tells it, she had a long-standing fear of thunder and lightning, which climaxed on this occasion and would not be contained by any of her usual means. An inner voice assured her that she would die and go to hell. Then, in rapid succession, she was convinced of the justice of her damnation, began to remember the merciful nature of God, and prayed fervently for forgiveness of her sins. At the moment of conversion—which she likens in her account to a cloudburst—she felt a flood of "love for God and all mankind." Most significantly, her phobia vanished in that instant, and she was suddenly able to rejoice in the presence of lightning. Then and thereafter she regarded it as a welcome messenger from the divine, an instructive outpouring of God's energy.[16]

As the "Dream of Slaughter" and the awakening experience predict, a major theme of Jackson's autobiography is the necessity of learning to act in ways that will earn and invite divine protection from the constant, debilitating threat of sudden violence, both natural and human. Conquest of paralyzing fear was prerequisite to any further development of her mission in life. Husband and brother were no shield against it. In her awakening, she learned that God's power could be at her service, if she were a fit vessel for it. In the "Dream of Slaughter," she began to understand that the act required to win divine protection was to refrain

15. Ibid., p. 23.

16. Later in her life, Jackson recorded instances of the windstorm functioning as a medium for divine communication with her. Marilyn Richardson has called my attention to the fact that Amanda Smith also used the natural forces as intermediaries with the divine, as when she asks the sun, moon, and wind to tell Jesus she is a sinner; *Autobiography,* p. 45. At one point Smith, like Jackson, controlled the wind through prayer (p. 158).

from acting—to "sit still, as though . . . dead." When she did this in the dream, she realized that she was guarded by the presence whose voice was heard over her head. The invisible protector of the dream not only prevented the completion of her mutilation but also taught her how to behave in order to avoid the terrible indignity of begging her merciless attacker to show mercy. Protection and instruction are so closely linked in this dream as to be almost indistinguishable. And although she acted in strict accordance with the instructions of the voice, it was still *her* action in the dream that saved her life.

Jackson's earliest visionary experience shows how important it was for her to find a source of instruction that could be relied on absolutely. It was difficult at first for her to be sure that the voice of the supernatural was always divine. Early in her career, Jackson disobeyed the instructions of an inner voice to pray for the conversions of two sick women. Fear was centrally involved in each case. The first failure was caused by her fear of racist mistreatment by the woman's husband, apparently white. In the other case, Jackson hesitated to tell the woman of her impending death, for fear that people would think her a "false prophet."

Doubting the authenticity of the true inner voice was an important aspect of this second failure. When both women died without receiving her aid, Jackson was seized with feelings of guilt and remorse. She then made a binding covenant with God to obey the commands of the inner voice absolutely and unconditionally in the future, in exchange for the unerring ability to distinguish "the true Spirit of God from all other spirits."

This covenant meant that Jackson devoted extraordinary, constant, unrelenting attention to inner reality, listening for the voice and watching for the vision that would communicate the directives of the Spirit, so that she would never again miss or misunderstand the necessary "instructions." As in her "Dream of Slaughter," she required herself to "sit still." She refused to go anywhere or do anything without receiving positive and explicit instruction to do so from the inner voice. Sometimes, this meant consciously blocking out the interferences of outer reality, insisting on silence, for example, so that she could hear the inner voice. Her writings show that as part of the early process of learning to hear clearly, and obey absolutely, Jackson exercised some important controls over her ecstatic and visionary experience.

To a surprising extent, she seems to have been aware of the close connection between altered or abnormal physical states and special mental or spiritual events. She observed, for example, that when she employed traditional ascetic exercises, including fasting, weeping, praying

aloud or in secret for long periods, avoiding sleep, she could "keep her spirit eye clear"—that is, rely on the accuracy of her visionary gifts. She was also aware, at some level, of the fact that she could surround herself with a kind of invisible protective wall of divine power by adopting a strenuous ascetic regimen. She shows this awareness in her account of her resumption of fasting and silent prayer in 1836, just before separating from her husband: "And I never spoke, and he had no power over me, not even to speak to me. And nobody had power to come until the three weeks was ended. I prayed day and night." Even when the altered bodily state was involuntary, the result of illness, such as fever, seizure or stroke, or a heart ailment, Jackson was able to take advantage of the condition to gain access to visionary experience. A number of her most impressive visionary dreams occurred during such times.[17]

Jackson's advocacy and practice of celibacy is best understood and appreciated in the context of her need to gain complete control over the use of her body, which she had come to regard primarily as an instrument for the receipt of spiritual instruction. Undoubtedly, her decision to renounce sexual relations also had its personal side for her, as a married woman without offspring, in a period when women were expected to deny female sexuality and submissively endure the mysterious male sexual urge.[18]

During her sanctification experience, in the neighborhood revival of 1831, Jackson had a revelation that "destroyed the lust of my flesh, and made me to hate it. . . . Of all things it seemed the most filthy in the sight of God, both in the married and unmarried, it all seemed alike." The flash of religious insight that accompanied this emotional experience helped her to determine the whole future course of her life by lighting up the meaning of Scripture from a new angle. In her words,

17. Jackson had an experience, for example, of leaving the body as a spirit and soaring above her house to discourse with angels, during a period when her left side was completely paralyzed. On two occasions, she describes what may have been epileptic seizures. During one of these, she experienced an important vision and a kind of spirit possession while in a state of semiconsciousness or trance. In the other, the physical manifestations of the seizure were interpreted as a display by the divine to Shaker leadership of Jackson's authenticity as a prophet. Jackson also experienced eye ailments on more than one occasion.

18. In the absence of concrete information, it would clearly be dangerous to assume that free black women would have regarded either male or female sexuality in the same way as did many contemporary white women. Yet within the evangelical Christian ideology of Methodism, women from both groups would have heard similar teachings about "the world, the flesh, and the devil."

"I never had felt so happy in all my life. I then saw for the first time what the sin of the fall of man was, and I thought if I had all the earth, I would give it, to be a single woman. How to return home to my husband again I knowed not."

In order to regain control over the sexual use of her own body, she had first to persuade her husband that it was not she, Rebecca Jackson, who wanted to end their sexual relationship but rather the overwhelming force of the divine Spirit that inhabited, moved, and possessed her. In her account of her return home in an ecstatic state, following sanctification, she shows us this part of the process of persuasion—a display of her amazing invulnerability to physical pain:

> in my march apraising God, I went from the cellar door to the stove . . . and then turn[ed] to the cellar with my eyes shut all the while. These two things caused my husband to believe that it was more than nature. He expected every time I laid my hands on the stove to see the skin come off on the stove, and when I went to the cellar door, to see me fall down the cellar. . . . He had not power to touch me, and when I was permitted to open my eyes, I saw him sitting on a chair with his two hands under his chin and ashaking like a person under a heavy fit of ague.

The message to her husband—that her body is no longer even hers, let alone his—could not be plainer.

Jackson followed her ascetic practices, her bodily self-mortification, for a full year after her sanctification, despite the efforts of her brother and husband to persuade her that by doing so she would ruin her health or make people think she was driven by a criminal guilt. Both the ascetic practices and the visionary experience they probably intensified were mystifying and disturbing to husband and brother. As she says, "My dreams became a burden to my family." Ultimately she realized the impossibility of reconciling her old life in the family with her new life entirely governed by the Spirit: "I had started to go the promised land, and I wanted husband, brother, and all the world to go with me, but my mind was made up to stop for none." A "gift of foresight" protected her from her husband Samuel's violent rage, when she finally told him she would serve him no longer. "Samuel sought my life day and night," but through "obedience to the light that was revealed in my soul, . . . I always was able to know what he was agoing to do, before he did himself."

It was obviously an important step for Jackson to free herself from a marriage relationship that she had increasingly come to feel as oppressive and as a barrier to her spiritual progress. Although she may not have done so with full consciousness, she used her religious experience both to win independence from her husband and to justify her desire for independence. She represented this process in her writings as strenuous, even dangerous, but she does not seem to have felt grief or loss when the marriage came to an end. The case was quite different when she came to separate herself from her older brother.

Joseph Cox still occupied a special place in Jackson's feelings at the time of her awakening, but various indications in her early writings suggest that she had already begun to feel the relationship to be a one-sided one. Even when describing her idolatrous respect for him, she recorded fairly plainly her resentment, as an adult woman, of the necessity of deferring to him when he was wrong: "He had always been kind and like a father to me, and I esteemed him as such. If he thought a thing was so, and I knew it was not, I would not contradict him."

The turning point in their relations occurred when he failed to keep a promise to teach her to read. As in many crises in her personal life after her conversion, Jackson used her access to divine communication to fill the gaps that were beginning to appear in her human relationships:

> So I went to get my brother to write my letters and to read them. So he was awriting a letter in answer to one he had just read. I told him what to put in. Then I asked him to read. He did. I said, "Thee has put in more than I told thee. . . . I don't want thee to *word* my letter. I only want thee to *write* it." Then he said, "Sister, thee is the hardest one I ever wrote for!" These words, together with the manner that he had wrote my letter, pierced my soul like a sword. . . . I could not keep from crying. And these words were spoken in my heart, "Be faithful, and the time shall come when you can write." These words were spoken in my heart as though a tender father spoke them. My tears were gone in a moment.

Jackson refers to herself in her writings as "the only child of my mother that had not learning." Perhaps this was because her child-care responsibilities as the eldest surviving resident girl child in her mother's large and widely spaced family had made schooling impossible.[19] Unable to read or write at the age of thirty-five, though from a literate background, Jackson's resentment of the editorial tyranny of her more privileged older brother is therefore quite understandable in personal

19. See the "Dream at Ten Years of Age" of March 23, 1854, which portrays the young Rebecca Cox as responsible for the care of her younger half-siblings.

terms. But Joseph Cox was also at this time an influential preacher with the Bethel A.M.E. Church of Philadelphia. Jackson had begun to threaten the church, or at least some clergymen associated with it, through her leadership of a Holiness meeting. In this context, Joseph Cox's interference in Jackson's correspondence may, in her view, have amounted to outright doctrinal censorship. As her scribe, he certainly had power over her content as well as her style.

As an adult woman who was already acting as a class leader and was well on her way to preaching publicly, she seems to have found her brother's power over her written expression intolerable. And so she prayed for divine help and received "the gift of reading." In one of the most moving episodes in her writings, she describes what it felt like to be granted this amazing and longed-for power (p. 107). Literacy gave her the independent access to past revelations of the divine will that enabled her to defend her doctrine and practices ably against attack by jealous or hostile clergy, as well as the personal satisfaction of throwing off her brother's patronizing control over her correspondence.

The trajectory of Rebecca Jackson's public career from 1831 through 1837, as it appears in these writings, is remarkable. Her secret conversion during the thunderstorm, followed six months later by her public experience of sanctification during a neighborhood revival, established her as a leading member in a "Convenant Meeting," composed primarily of A.M.E. church members who believed in sanctification and the possibility of living a life of "Christian perfection." Then she started a smaller weekly meeting of her own, in order to encourage two shy sisters and her husband Samuel (then seeking conversion) to testify in a more supportive setting. These meetings, led by Jackson and her spiritual sister Mary Peterson, wife of A.M.E. preacher Daniel Peterson, began to attract large crowds almost immediately. They were visited by the second bishop of the A.M.E. church, Richard Allen's immediate successor, Morris Brown (see fig. 5), in response to claims that "that Rebecca Jackson" was acting improperly as a woman "aleading the men." Even more serious, because she refused to become a formal member of any church (not having received divine instruction to do so),[20] she was seen

20. Jackson refers to her mother's involvement in a Methodist praying band and to her own Methodist upbringing (pp. 133, 167). But she also implies that, despite living in the home of an A.M.E. preacher, she was only nominally religious at the time of her conversion. I have not been able to locate any membership lists for the Philadelphia A.M.E. churches for this very early period of the 1820s and 1830s to determine whether Jackson was even a formal church member during these years before conversion.

as intent on "chopping up the churches." But Brown was reportedly satisfied, after visiting Jackson's meeting, that "if ever the Holy Ghost was in any place, it was in that meeting."

Jackson began to preach in the town of Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, on the Delaware River, while on a visit there in 1833, traveling by steamboat (fig. 6). She touched off responsive waves of revivalistic fervor, among whites at least as much as among blacks, wherever she spoke. By the middle of the decade, she had made at least one extensive preaching tour of many towns and villages immediately west and south of Philadelphia (see fig. 7).

By comparison with the travels in the 1820s and 1830s of Jackson's sister preacher and acquaintance, Jarena Lee (see fig. 8), Jackson's career as an itinerant was a limited one. The total distance she was to travel, by stagecoach, canal boat, steamboat, and foot, would not nearly match Lee's thousands of miles, on circuits through the border states, Ohio, and British Canada. Nor would Jackson's number of consecutive days, months, or years on the road approach Lee's extraordinary record. But Lee traveled under the auspices and protection of the A.M.E. church, which had opened regular circuits through all these areas and offered homes all along the route for traveling preachers. Jackson traveled without such support. In fact, according to her account, she met with determined opposition to her itinerant career from some of the A.M.E. congregations and leaders in eastern Pennsylvania. In 1835 or 1836, for example, according to her account, three "Methodist ministers" challenged her right to speak, threatening to expel from their churches those who offered their homes to her. But the attempts at persecution backfired, bringing more people to her side.

By far the most threatening aspect of Rebecca Jackson's ministry in the 1830s, from the point of view of the established independent black churches, was her radical attack on the "carnality" of the churches themselves. In Jackson's eyes, they had failed to teach the demanding truth that "holy living"—which included celibacy—was the only way to "follow Christ" as was required. This belief, which she expounded using Old and New Testament texts and her own conversion and spiritual experience as a basis, caused intense controversy even within Holiness circles. In 1837, accused of heresy, Jackson demanded a formal, interdenominational trial at her own house in Philadelphia, with representatives of the various black Methodist and Presbyterian churches present. She specified wanting "mothers of the church" at her trial, along with the A.M.E. bishop and "five or six . . . ministers, men that can read and that are spiritual"—presumably, men who believed in Spirit-inspired

experience and preaching. "I wish nobody to speak in my behalf," she said. "If I am wrong, let me be righted by the Spirit and by the Scriptures."

Her final break with her clergyman brother Joseph Cox occurred at this time. He had given her only lukewarm and vacillating support in her earliest days of preaching, and his warnings against excessive enthusiasm had betrayed his view that she was "agoing crazy." Now, perhaps because he was himself still on shaky ground with the church, after a fall from grace,[21] Cox reacted with rage to her demand for a formal trial. She was refused the trial, as she learned from Daniel Peterson. Though she interpreted the outcome of the conflict as a moral victory for herself, it is probable that her last ties with her natural family and with African Methodism, her church of upbringing, were broken at this time.

In the years following her conversion and sanctification, Jackson derived much of her confidence in her ability to stand alone, unsupported by husband, brother, or church, from her visionary experience. At first, she had regarded her brother as a religious authority, asking his advice on theological questions when her experience puzzled her. But soon she found a less compromising source of authority within herself. In "A Dream of Three Books," in 1836, she came under the authority of a kindly, fatherly, instructor figure, a white man dressed in Shaker-like drab. In this dream, Jackson's husband formally handed her over to the instructor at her own back door and then disappeared. The man then showed her three books covering "the beginning of creation to the end of time" and promised to instruct her in them. The man was still visible and present when she awoke from sleep, and this visionary instructor supported her during the long process of self-education she had undertaken from the moment she received the gift of reading.

A recurrent message in the spiritual instruction that Jackson received in the 1830s was that self-control brought power. In one of the most interesting of the instructive gifts, she was taught that she could even exercise control over external nature, the weather. Through prayer, she stopped a rainstorm that threatened to interfere with her going to a certain religious service as she had been instructed to do. Later, a voice

21. A.M.E. records indicate that Joseph Cox was expelled as a local elder in 1832 for unknown reasons, which may have had to do with mismanagement of church money during his tenure as treasurer of the Bethel A.M.E. Church. See "Glossary of Proper Names" for a summary of the information on Cox that suggests this interpretation. He seems only temporarily to have been under a cloud.

from the heavens assured her that, even though she had climbed "to the heaven and take[n] hold of the clouds" by stopping the storm, she had done nothing impious. The power was allowed her in order to teach her a metaphorical lesson about self-control as a means to moral transformation: "If thou can climb to the heaven and take hold of the clouds, which are above thy reach, . . . then thou can have power over thy light and trifling nature, and over thy own body. . . . Thy make must be unmade and remade, and thou must be made a new creature."

During the 1830s, Jackson had also come to have confidence in her ability to exercise limited control over the threatening behavior of others through her gifts. Premonitory "gifts of foresight" had allowed her to avoid human menace by anticipating it, for example, as when Samuel Jackson made attempts to kill her before acknowledging her right to a separate life. On more than one occasion, she had been given more direct "gifts of power," which amounted to something closely approaching magic.[22] On the occasion of first visiting a Shaker meeting in the fall of 1836, for example, when she feared that one of her companions was about to make a disparaging remark about the people she already knew by her inner voice to be "the true people of God on earth," she "bound" her companions to silence. Perhaps the fact that she felt the need to resort to the exercise of supernatural power on her own behalf, at this point in her career, suggests a continuing sense of vulnerability—despite her considerable successes as an itinerant preacher and her strong conviction that she acted as God's vehicle. Her intense isolation, to which unswerving loyalty to the inner voice consigned her, was still to be fully faced and conquered.

Jackson had fought free of old emotional dependencies and had experienced a sequence of important, but not fully satisfactory, female friendships based on shared spiritual experience and religious conviction.

22. The ideological and technical differences between these Christian "gifts of power" and the outright magical practices of black folk religion ("root-working" or "hoodoo") should be stressed. First and foremost, these gifts were apparently used only in self-defense, and for "good"—as defined by the will of God—rather than for such secular, individualized motives as revenge, power, pleasure, money, and sexual satisfaction and love, as was the case with root-working. Nor did Jackson's gifts require special training or pharmaceutical knowledge and apparatus, as the conjurer's did. (For several interesting treatments of varieties of black folk religion, with an emphasis on the historical involvement of black women in magical practices, see the sources by Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, and Charles W. Chestnutt, listed in "A Note on Bibliography.")

She stood, at the end of the 1830s, on the brink of her unusual, painful, and ultimately fruitful search for a perfectionist community to replace the family and community ties she had come to see as based on the imperfection of fallen human nature. This search, partially recorded in the writings of the 1840s and 1850s, shows her efforts to strike a balance between an intense desire for autonomy and control over her life and an equally intense need for a spiritual community. Her life in the predominantly white Shaker sisterhood at Watervliet, New York, was to clarify her ideas about the community she was looking for. And Shakerism was to provide a feminist theology, useful when she came to the decision to create and lead her own, predominantly black, Shaker sisterhood in Philadelphia.

As for the more private and personal side of her search for "spiritual" human relationships, the writings give only fitful glimpses of her strong attachment to her younger disciple and later namesake, Rebecca Perot, whom she probably met during this transitional time in the late 1830s. However fragmentary, the evidence suggests a relationship combining elements of motherhood, marriage, and sisterhood in a blend that seems to have suited the two women's personal needs for over thirty-five years, until Jackson's death in 1871.

"LIVING TO LIVE FOREVER": JACKSON'S LATER CAREER

There is a tantalizing gap in the record between 1836 and 1840. During this time nothing definite is known of where Jackson was living or what she was doing. At the point when the story is resumed, in 1840, she was associated with a group of religious Perfectionists, most of them white, who were living in the Albany area. She first met them, according to her account, at the conclusion of an 1840 preaching tour, which took place in New York and southern New England and ended in Albany (see fig. 7).

Shaker records indicate that this group of Perfectionists, the "Little Band," was organized in 1837 by a man named Allen Pierce, who was

> gifted in seeing spirits and hearing them talk, both good and bad, dark and shining. . . . The Lord was pleased with them, and gave them visions and revelations. . . . Rebecca Jackson afterwards came to see the gathered few, and the Band looked up to her as having greater gifts than they had. She was leader in the gift of ministration while with the band. Her gift was to travel some and speak to the people.[23]

Her western trip in New York State as far as the Syracuse area, in 1842, was made with associates from this group (see fig. 7). She spent both the winter of 1841–42 and that of 1842–43 with the "gathered" Perfectionists residing at the Ostrander family house in Albany. During this time, an internal struggle seems to have developed within the group. Though the issues are not made entirely clear in Jackson's account, the question of celibacy seems to have been involved. In 1843, after two visits to the nearby Shaker community at Watervliet, many of the Albany Perfectionists decided to join the Shakers. In the words of Nathaniel Fry, one of Jackson's Albany associates and later a Shaker elder, the Little Band "was dismissed by the Spirit saying through Allen, 'Go and join the Shakers.' "

Rebecca Jackson was among the sixteen Perfectionists (including children) who ultimately became Shakers.[24] She had visited the Shaker community, where Mother Ann Lee's remains were buried, in the winter of 1842–43, along with others from the Little Band (see fig. 9). Her detailed descriptions in these writings of visionary events that occurred for her during a three-day visit indicate how very impressed with Shakerism she was. From 1843 on, Jackson felt completely committed to the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, though she did not actually go to Watervliet to live until 1847. She and Rebecca Perot probably spent most of the intervening years in Philadelphia, with occasional visits to Watervliet.

Jackson's initial attraction to Shakerism was based on their whole general appearance of spirituality—their decorum, uniformity of dress, plainness, cleanliness, and otherworldliness of expression conveying to

23. Alonzo G. Hollister recorded this information, based on the memory of Jackson's former associate and then Shaker elder, Nathaniel Fry, in May 1877 in the manuscript anthology he was compiling of Jackson's writings; Western Reserve manuscript VI-B:39 (hereafter cited as WR), pp. 143–44.

24. According to Fry, "The Band numbered thirteen at one time, while others partially united for a time and then went away. Sixteen of the Band, including children, came to the Shakers, seven of whom remained with Believers and the others turned back. The Band could not all be gathered in at once, for some of them were in debt to the world. Those that remained outside came occasionally to Shaker meeting until their debts were paid, and then they were gathered in" (WR, p. 144).

her a strong belief in their inner blessedness. Believers struck her as the living embodiment of Christian perfection or Holiness, which she herself had been pursuing since the early 1830s. With retrospective insight, she wrote that at her first sight of Shakers in 1836 her inner divine voice had said of them, "These are my people." Immediately afterward, this message was confirmed by an ecstatic reaction in her body:

> the power of God came upon me like the waves of the sea, and caused me to move back and forth under the mighty waters. It was as much as I could do to keep my seat. . . . They all seemed to look as if they were looking into the spiritual world . . . as if they were living to live forever.

Later, when she had gained access to the Shakers' published testimonies, history, and doctrine, she was surprised to find how closely these "agreed" with her own experience and beliefs. Their positive view of celibacy, their encouragement of ecstatic experience during worship and divine revelation through human instruments, and their condemnation of churches and human governments as illegitimate usurpations of the authority that should reside only in the true Christian community—all these seemed uncannily similar to Jackson's own independently developed social and religious views. Even their sacred dancing, at first puzzling and suspect to a Methodist, was acceptable, once understood as a visible representation of spiritual truths. One such important truth bodied forth in their dance and ritual was the communal unity and harmony of all Believers, because of their special relationship to the divine (figs. 10 and 11). Although she does not allude to it directly, the fact that Shaker communities integrated black members on an apparently fully equal basis, from their founding around the time of the Revolutionary War, may have contributed to Jackson's commitment. Though they abstained from direct political involvement in the state they saw as illegitimate, Shakers had strongly abolitionist sympathies, and the northern Shaker communities may have acted as stations on the Underground Railroad.[25]

25. Because of their view of secular human governments, the Shakers did not consider themselves American citizens and so did not vote and refused military service on conscientious grounds. Their abolitionism was therefore purely moral rather than political—as was true of the Garrisonian abolitionism of the 1830s. For a very brief discussion of the Shaker efforts to embody antislavery ideology in egalitarian treatment of black members, see Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (1953; rpt. New York: Dover, 1963), pp. 214–16. A thorough study of the black presence in Shaker communities has yet to be done.

Perhaps the decisive factor in Jackson's decision to join the Shakers, however, was their recognition of her as an authentic "prophet." They were as strongly impressed with her as she was with them. Near the end of the three-day visit in January 1843, after several important visions brought on in part by illness and fasting, Jackson had what sounds remarkably like a seizure. This occurred in the presence of the eldress of the Gathering Order (otherwise called the South Family), the communal family that housed potential and recent converts. Jackson interpreted the seizure as a physical manifestation, through her body to the Shaker leadership, of her own status as "chosen" by the Shaker's Holy Mother Wisdom.[26] It would have been natural for Jackson to assume that this special status would be acknowledged by the leadership when she came to live among Shakers.

A modern reader of Jackson's writings can see, with the benefit of hindsight, that an important misunderstanding between her and the Shaker leadership was already beginning to develop during this visit in January 1843, over the authority that she insisted on for her inner voice. Shaker rules required that a convert make a full, public confession of past sins in the presence of the spiritual leader of the same sex. This was a way of casting off the old life "of the flesh" completely and beginning a new life "in the regeneration"—a redeemed life on earth. (Such earthly blessedness was made possible by the Second Appearing of Christ in Ann Lee, which had already ushered in the promised Millennium.) But Jackson's "confession" did not follow the rules. According to her account, when she began to tell Shaker leaders "a part of my experience," at the urging of her inner voice, during the 1843 visit, they interrupted her, hurrying her into a room where she could make her confession with only sisters present. By the time they were ready, her inner voice had fallen silent, and the "confession" was left "incomplete." In the overwhelming rush of strong feelings that this visit provoked, Jackson seems to have dismissed this first conflict between inward and outward authority as insignificant, if she in fact noticed it at all. She probably believed, in fact, that because her gifts had been acknowledged

26. For excerpts from Shaker writing about the female aspects of divinity, including the Holy Mother Wisdom concept, see the Appendix. The feminist theology of Shakerism is discussed briefly below.

as authentic by Shaker leadership, the elders and eldresses would allow her to follow her inward guidance absolutely while at Watervliet, as she had always done in the past. But this was not to be the case.

Jackson's writings from the first, four-year-long Watervliet residence are unfortunately not very detailed. When they are supplemented by Shaker records, some important facts about her life there emerge. Her work, for example, consisted primarily of sewing, as it had done when she was a seamstress in Philadelphia. The sex-based division of labor in Shaker communities was highly traditional: the heavy agricultural and mechanical jobs were done by the brethren, and all of the cloth, clothing, and food manufacture and domestic maintenance work needed for community self-sufficiency was done collectively by the sisterhood. Jackson was one of a group of sisters assigned to take care of mending clothing for the brethren. She probably took a turn every several months at working in the family's communal kitchen with other sisters as well, as most sisters did (see fig. 12).

Jackson and Rebecca Perot joined the South Family together. In almost all of the references in Shaker records, they are mentioned as a pair, called "the two Rebeccas." This suggests that they continued to live together during these years, perhaps sleeping in the same room (which would have been shared with one or two other sisters). Jackson also became close to at least one and probably several white sisters from the South Family during this four-year stay. After she had left Watervliet, a number of the white sisters appeared in nostalgic dreams of her Shaker "home." The feelings of loss expressed at the death of one of them, Sister Ann Potter, seem particularly strong (p. 259).

Throughout Jackson's first Watervliet residence, her skills as a public preacher were recognized by the leadership as very unusual. With the exception of eldresses, Shaker sisters did not ordinarily preach—although they did act as spirit-instruments, or mouthpieces of the divine, in great numbers. But Rebecca Jackson preached frequently in the Sabbath Shaker meetings that were open to the non-Shaker "world." Shaker family records note her impressive performances briefly:

> September 10 [1848]. Attend public meeting. Brother George Wickersham and James Wilson met with us, James expressed his thankfulness, Sister Rebecca Jackson rose up and spoke beautiful of the good way of God.
>
> [September 1850.] Sabbath. We go to meeting. Rebecca Jackson preached. A large number of the world.[27]

27. Both 1848 and 1850 entries occur in WR V-B:333.

Shaker records also add some confirmation to the story that emerges from Jackson's writings of her reasons for leaving Watervliet in July 1851. It appears that during her stay she became increasingly concerned about the "spiritual and temporal bondage" of slaves and free blacks. While at Watervliet, she probably functioned from the beginning, with leadership support, as a kind of ambassador of Shakerism to visiting blacks. On one occasion, for example, the records indicate that "Mary, a black runaway slave," stayed at Watervliet for a few days and then was taken on to Schenectady: "The two Rebeccas go with [her]." On other occasions, Jackson and Perot are glimpsed in contact with visiting nonresident converts, referred to as "young Believers from Philadelphia" or "some of her Philadelphia friends." From October 22 through December 18, 1850, Jackson and Perot visited Philadelphia, probably on a missionary tour, with the intention of bringing back more black, nonresident converts to live.[28]

Yet, according to Jackson's writings, she was not satisfied with Shaker efforts to reach out to blacks. She asserted with retrospective insight that the insularity and materialism of the Shakers had begun to concern her almost from the moment of her arrival in 1847:

> After I came to Watervliet, in the year 1847, and saw how Believers seemed to be gathered to themselves, in praying for themselves and not for the world, which lay in midnight darkness, I wondered how the world was to be saved, if Shakers were the only people of God on the earth, and they seemed busy in their own concerns, which were mostly temporal. . . . I cried to the Lord both day and night, for many months, that God would make a way

28. South Family Journal, Watervliet (WR V-B:308), entry for June 28, 1848; Church Family Diaries, Watervliet (NYSL), entry for July 14, 1848; Second Family Journal, Watervliet (WR V-B:333), entry for July 15, 1848. It is possible that Jackson maintained contact with the Philadelphia free black A.M.E. community throughout the Watervliet stay or reestablished contact during the visit to Philadelphia near the end of 1850. The connection is suggested by a reference in the Second Family Journal, Watervliet (WR V-B:333), for April 27, 1851: "Sabath we go to meeting George speak a large assembly of the world Rebeca Jackson's friends there Robinson & Co." When this reference is put together with another (WR V-B:309) to "the black priest Robinson," whom the Watervliet elders visited in Albany on January 8, 1851, an association between Jackson and independent black clergy is one likely interpretation. (A Reverend Richard Robinson was the minister in charge of A.M.E. Bethel Church in Philadelphia in 1855.)

> that the world might hear the Gospel . . . for I knew by revelation, that it was God's will that they should.

That she was thinking particularly of the needs of the black community when referring to the non-Shaker "world" here is indicated by a series of references to "the burden of my people," which occur in her writings about the 1840s and 1850s.[29] She seems to have felt an increasingly pressing concern with reestablishing relations with other blacks, as racial and sectional tensions heightened in the decade prior to the Civil War.

Jackson had other reasons, less overtly expressed, for dissatisfaction with the leadership of her communal family at Watervliet. A variety of allusions suggest that her difficulties centered on conflict that developed between her and the newly appointed South Family eldress, Paulina Bates.[30] An early, indirect indication of Jackson's critical attitude toward Bates occurs in the account of a conversation with Ann Potter about the imminent and unexplained replacement of the second eldress, Mary Ann Ayers, whom Jackson apparently respected (p. 221). Bates would, at a minimum, have been consulted before her assistant was replaced. Even more likely, she or Ayers might have requested the change, pleading their incompatibility as co-workers. This anecdote, at any rate, is a revealing reminder that the Shaker communal families, for all their idealism, were in many ways like isolated rural villages in the outside world. They certainly had internal factions, and probably members of the family sisterhood competed with one another for prominence in both spiritual and secular responsibilities. In short, they were not quite the utopian ideal of perfectly holy living that Jackson had so admired from a distance.

At some point in 1850 or 1851, then, Jackson must have revealed to Eldress Paulina that she had a calling to lead a permanent Shaker mis-

29. See part 3, n. 44, and part 4, nn. 19, 32. Jackson's dream of "going south to feed the people" of July 13, 1848, probably refers to her sense of mission to the black community in Philadelphia, as does her dream of "housekeeping in Philadelphia" with "a little family of spiritual children" of February 1850. Even her dream of March 20, 1850, of wanting to "fly to Philadelphia" with Rebecca Perot, because of its revelation that "the people designed to kill us," suggests an urgent need to leave the predominantly white Watervliet and return to a black environment.

30. Bates took over as eldress from Rebecca Carter, whom Jackson had dealt with in her visit of 1843. One passage, dated March 22, 1848, suggests strongly Jackson's dislike or distrust of Bates—or perhaps simply her disappointment in losing Carter—by referring to her experience of "great temptation, and deep affliction, on account of a change in our Elders." Paulina Bates had been appointed to the elders order of the South Family in February of 1848.

sionary venture in Philadelphia, among blacks.[31] In an account written in 1854 of her decision to leave Watervliet, Jackson asserted that her inner voice had told her shortly after she arrived the exact year and day when she was to leave on this mission. But Bates apparently refused to give official approval for the plan. From the Watervliet leadership's viewpoint it was very dangerous to allow Believers to be exposed to the false values and corrupt behavior of "the world." No unsupervised mingling of Believers and non-Believers had been permitted, as a general rule, since the initial "gathering" or separation of these celibate, economically self-sustaining communities from American society at large. Only unavoidable business contacts with the outside world were allowed, and those were carefully monitored. Moreover, in the 1840s and early 1850s, Shaker communities were just beginning to emerge from one of their most intensely isolationist periods. During this time of spiritualistic revival, called "Mother Ann's work" or "the Era of Manifestations," important ideological and factional conflicts were covertly enacted through the pronouncements of spirit-mediums or "instruments."[32] Shaker communities were entirely closed to the public during the most concentrated phase of this highly politicized religious activity. Jackson and Perot had initially settled at Watervliet just after the community's public meetings had been resumed and at a time when the level of spirit manifestations had begun to fall off.

It seems likely, therefore, that when Eldress Paulina Bates refused to authorize Jackson's mission to Philadelphia she was merely enforcing, in

31. Jackson's urgency about leaving Watervliet coincided with the outbreak of the "Rochester-rappings" style of spiritualism all over the northeastern United States in 1850. It is even possible that the outbreak of spiritualism in Philadelphia in this year was a factor in Jackson's timing of her departure. She may have shared the view held by some of the Shaker leaders at Watervliet, New Lebanon, and other communities that the spirits, having completed their "Era of Manifestations" within the Shaker communities, were now manifesting themselves more broadly in the world, in order to begin the promised process of converting the whole world to the new Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing. Sending Shaker missionaries like herself to follow up on these spiritualistic events that were happening in cities like Philadelphia would have seemed to Jackson the right policy for Shaker leadership to adopt, had they really wanted to spread the gospel at this time.

32. Paulina Bates, interestingly enough, had herself been a prominent spirit-medium during the 1840s and was the editor/author of a large anthology of messages from the spirit world, *The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom* . . . (Canterbury, N.H.: Shakers, 1849).

her own view, the current policy of the Society's eldresses and elders against any undue contact with non-Believers. From Jackson's perspective, however, the eldress must have appeared to be obstructing a divinely ordained project for mysterious and perhaps sinister reasons of her own. In the letter of 1854, Jackson indicated in a general way her puzzlement at the now unavoidable contradiction between the voices of internal and external authority:

> Being always led by an invisible lead, I would not submit to anything outward that was contrary to the inward. And this being hid from my outward lead, they could not give me a gift to come away, though I begged hard for it. And this was a great mystery to me, why it was not made known to them.

This is as close as Jackson comes in these writings to doubting the authenticity of the Shaker leadership's claim to embody the divine afflatus manifested in Ann Lee.

That Jackson believed it was primarily the eldress who obstructed her mission is indicated most clearly by a dream of 1855 (after she had been in exile from Watervliet for four years). In this dream, the family elder, Issacher Bates, Jr. (see fig. 13), visited Jackson and

> said considerable about Eldress Paulina Bates. I told him many things that I had told Eldress Paulina before I came away, which he seemed surprised to hear. I had told him I had been honest and candid in all my movements from the beginning. . . . After I had told him all I had said to Eldress Paulina, word for word, he appeared to rejoice as with a father's love over a lost child that he had unexpectedly found.

Shaker records confirm that she was regarded by Shaker leadership as having "abandoned her home in Zion" or "proved addle—gone to preaching in her own gift," although the purpose of her leaving was also known. A July 12, 1851, entry in the Watervliet Church Family Diary by David A. Buckingham reads:

> We understand that Rebecca Jackson and the other colored woman that came with her, have started out, in their own gift, some time last week, on a mission to convert her nation, or under that pretence, perhaps consciously, but I should say, rather delusively.[33]

33. Letter of February 15, 1852, from "George" to "Beloved Brother Joseph" (WR Correspondence Watervliet, IV-A:81); Isaac Youngs's Personal Journal (OC #10, 509); and WR V-B:280.

During the six years Jackson and Perot spent in Philadelphia after leaving Watervliet in 1851, they took a very lively interest in séance spiritualism. They attended spiritualistic "circles" and trained themselves to act as speaking and writing "mediums." This activity impresses a modern reader of Jackson's writings as primarily her efforts to settle old emotional business with the spirits of her estranged husband and brother—both dead since she had quarreled with them. Although interesting as evidence of Jackson's continuing curiosity about the spirit world, and of her eclectic approach to ecstatic religious practices, the accounts of these Philadelphia séances lack the passionate conviction of Jackson's descriptions of true visionary experience and of her dreaming life.

The writings from this time show that Jackson's concept of the invisible life in the world beyond death was changing. Her experience of the ritualized enactments of spirit inspiration at Watervliet, and to a lesser extent the writings of prominent non-Shaker spiritualists, contributed to this changing concept. Briefly, the official Shaker explanation of the "Era of Manifestations," gradually developed before Jackson arrived at Watervliet, held that a religious revival was going on in the spirit world, under the guidance of Mother Ann Lee, among souls that had died without knowledge of the new Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing. These souls now had the chance to learn about that Gospel firsthand. If they accepted its truth, they could confess their sins and enter into the gradual or progressive work of self-purification, "regeneration," salvation—just as living Shakers did. Spirits of the unredeemed dead could contact living Believers and observe their lives, begin to follow their example in the spirit world, and ultimately take their places among the redeemed spirits. This is what Jackson believed to be happening, then, when her dead husband's and brother's spirits appeared to her, first at Watervliet, and later at Philadelphia. Her brother's spirit, interestingly enough, became a kind of spiritual advisor and clergyman to her husband's—replicating their relationship to each other of the old days, it seems.

Jackson felt a need, especially in the mid-1850s, to end her estrangement from Shaker leadership. In the letter of 1854 describing her departure from Watervliet, she expressed only "official" emotions of grief and bewilderment at the elders' failure to approve her mission. But it would be understandable if she had also felt considerable and perhaps unacknowledged anger at the "beloved Eldress" Paulina Bates, who had, as Jackson felt, misrepresented Jackson's motives and spiritual condition to the other members of the Shaker leadership and, by disapproving the mission to Philadelphia, failed to respond adequately to the needs

of potential black converts. One of the most interesting sequences of dream accounts in her writings seems to deal in somewhat symbolic terms with Jackson's conflict with the eldress. Through the dream actions she taught herself how to find a resolution in her waking life to this important conflict.

In her early writings, Jackson recorded with admirable frankness the difficulty she had, after receiving the call to a holy life, in acquiring the demanding self-discipline of "perfect love." It was one thing to experience a wave of love for all humankind, instantaneously, in the crisis of conversion. It was quite another to teach oneself to love one's enemies, in practice, day after day. Before she was called to make herself into a "new creature," she said, "my principle by nature was to revenge all that troubled me." But her inner voice had told her that this would not do:

> I must never let the sun go down and I feeling hard at anyone that had done anything to me however cruel or unjust. I must go and pray for them until I felt sorry for them and loved them as though they had done nothing. . . . my prayers could not be heard for my own soul, until I loved and prayed for all my enemies.

Various experiences in her early career with religious associates like Mary Peterson, Martha Low, and Mary S. Lloyd testified to the reality of continuing hard feelings—the jealousy, suspicion, anger, resentment, and malice that Jackson's inner instructor was pressuring her continually to bring under control. In the case of Eldress Paulina the conflict caused by hard feelings that would not vanish must have been more than ordinarily intense. In all probability the fact that the eldress was a white woman in a position of authority over Jackson would have made her threatening in a particularly complicated way. Almost inevitably, the situation would have reminded Jackson of the fearsome, arbitrarily and often cruelly exercised power of the white mistress of slavery or of the tyranny of many white women employers of urban domestic workers.

Against this background, two dreams that Jackson recorded during her years in Philadelphia in the mid-1850s are very suggestive. In the first ("Dream at Ten Years of Age," p. 234) memories of a childhood dream apply directly to her problem, as an adult, facing the bogey of the powerful white woman. In the dream, the child Rebecca Cox is locked in conflict with a white witch, who kills her family members one by one. The child successfully challenges the witch by discovering the limits of her powers—the witch can pursue Rebecca, who is fleeing with her family's souls to heaven, only up to a certain point. Then she can

fly no higher. As the dream ends, Jackson's child-self is dispatched by God on a second mission, to bring all the souls of her remaining kin to heaven—a mission metaphorically applicable to Jackson's adult mission of starting her own Shaker community in the free black community of Philadelphia.

In the second dream ("Dream of Home and Search for Eldress Paulina," p. 268), Jackson, now an adult, returns to Watervliet, only to find that grossly racially discriminatory practices now characterize the treatment of black converts there—as they did not in her day. When she finds Eldress Paulina she enjoys her "maternal" embrace and takes in good spirit the mock chastisement of the eldress, expressing no overt fear or anger. But behind the clean facade of Shaker houses she discovers piles of manure or garbage and open segregation and neglect of black converts and their families. All these features of the dream landscape speak loudly and clearly of the inadequacies of the white Shaker leadership. Moreover one of the white Shaker deaconesses, the former second eldress Mary Ann Ayers (fig. 14), suggests to the eldress that Jackson would be the very best person they could find to "gather" the increasing numbers of blacks attracted to Shakerism.

According to this interpretation, then, Jackson allowed her dreaming self to persuade her waking self that it was both necessary and possible to return to Watervliet and arrive at a compromise with the eldress. It was necessary because Jackson saw herself as the only Shaker capable of applying the true principles of the Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing in a nonracist manner when blacks and whites were to share together in communal life. It was possible because the white witch of the dream could not fly as high as Jackson could and therefore could not interfere in her direct communication with the divine. Eldress Paulina's greeting in the "Dream of Home" implied that the eldress was bound by Shaker rules and custom to act like Jackson's loving spiritual "mother," if Jackson would simply make the requisite, ritualized gesture of being her spiritual "child"—the promise of obedience. Jackson also had at this time several dreams in which she visited with genuinely loved Shaker sisters, known intimately in her Watervliet days but since that time deceased, and this nostalgic imagery may have been part of the process of self-persuasion.

Shortly after she recorded the "Dream of Home," Jackson followed the dream's advice and returned, with Perot, for a final year's residence at Watervliet. For nearly half of that time, she was very ill with a mysterious eye ailment. Coming out of her illness, she had a thrice-repeated vision of the Shakers' Holy Mother Wisdom, who assured her that she

was now released from the covenant she had made with God in 1831 to obey her inner voice absolutely. This enabled Jackson to send the message to Eldress Paulina, who was herself sick at the time, that she was the eldress's "obedient child." Eldress Paulina replied that "that was everything." And so, in October 1858, Jackson and Perot again left Watervliet for Philadelphia. This time Eldress Paulina Bates gave Rebecca Jackson her official blessing—"Now you are endowed with power and authority." Jackson had also won the implicit moral, legal, and financial backing of the entire Shaker society of nineteen communities. The process by which she gave herself permission to make the necessary compromise with the eldress is an important instance of her ability to use her visionary gifts to help solve the most pressing problems in her outward life.

Rebecca Jackson's first "solemn meeting" as a Shaker eldress was held in April 1859 in Philadelphia. The writings after 1858 are very few, but they do indicate that Jackson and Perot were holding meetings and visiting the sick, even as Pennsylvania was plunged into Civil War. Jackson continued to dream and to have visions and revelations. She continued to digest Shaker theology. In her one overt reference to national political events, she recorded her joy at the Emancipation Proclamation, in September 1862. Her last writing bears the date June 4, 1864—seven years before her death. Nothing certain is known of what happened to her or Rebecca Perot, or to the fledgling Philadelphia Shaker family, between 1864 and 1871.[34]

Rebecca Jackson's life and writings make it clear enough that she felt that midcentury Shakerism, as embodied in the white-led Watervliet community, did not satisfy the needs of blacks for a community of spiritual relations and a model of "living to live forever." Though she

34. I have discovered no evidence to suggest that Jackson ever drew on the financial resources of the larger Shaker communities during her lifetime. When contact between the Watervliet leaders and the little Philadelphia family was reestablished in 1871, the parent community did thereafter help out occasionally with the family's rent or by sending books or small contributions of other kinds; see WR Correspondence Watervliet, IV-A:83. It was standard practice for one Shaker community to assist another with such gifts and financial aid in difficult times. Unfortunately, Jackson's writings do not confirm the date of the founding of the Philadelphia family, given in a letter from an anonymous writer from Philadelphia to the *Shaker Manifesto,* dated May 1889 (19, no. 5: 110–11), as 1866. There may have been difficulties in gathering her followers together into a communal family, related to the outbreak of the Civil War shortly after Jackson and Perot returned to Philadelphia to begin their mission.

found it disappointing, and even finally impossible, to live in the Watervliet community, however, there is no indication that she ever rejected Shaker theology or its principles of community organization. On the contrary, she seems to have spent many years in Philadelphia in the 1850s digesting, selecting, and transforming, to fit her own experience and her view of black needs, the doctrine explained in Shaker publications that she had acquired during her Watervliet years.

The Shakers' highly idiosyncratic, millennialistic view of world history and scriptural revelation, which she found in these works, was probably the single most important influence on her thought about theological matters, beyond the Methodism of her early years. It apparently spurred her to reconceptualize much of her own early experience of divine guidance in the light of her new understanding.

Among the most important features of Shaker theology, for Jackson as a woman aspiring to lifelong religious leadership in a communal setting, was its feminism. The elaborately defended doctrine of the four-in-one Godhead—in which the Father and Son of traditional Christianity are balanced and completed by a Mother and Daughter in Deity—was both illuminating to her personally and useful to her as a female leader.

Originally developed in response to attacks by non-Believers on Ann Lee's claim that she embodied the Christ Spirit, the basic Shaker position was that the divine Spirit had descended twice in history into human form. The first time, it appeared in Jesus of Nazareth, who began the work of human redemption by bringing the first Gospel. The second time, it was manifested in Ann Lee of Manchester, England, who completed the redemption and ushered in the promised Millennium. Part of the evidence that the Millennium had already begun, indeed, was the revelation of the "mystery" alluded to in Scripture—that the Almighty Father had had a female partner, coeternal with Him, called Holy Mother Wisdom. Shaker theological writers combed Scripture and found plentiful allusions to Her existence and role in the cosmic drama of creation and redemption. This idea of a perfectly balanced male and female Godhead was a deliberate reflection, of course, of Shaker communal organization, in which a female-headed sisterhood and a male-headed brotherhood lived together within each communal family in spiritual "union," and parallel hierarchies of female and male leaders managed all aspects of the family's spiritual and economic lives.

The pervasive theological feminism of Shakerism and the practical applications of it that Jackson had experienced during her Watervliet residences probably contributed to Jackson's changing image of her in-

ternal "instructor"—the personification of her inner voice. Along with this changed image of her inner sources of wisdom and power may have come a more thoroughly positive view of herself.

Prior to her association with the Shakers, with one possible exception (which may be an instance of retrospective reinterpretation),[35] Jackson's image of her interior religious instructor and guide, like her image of God, was exclusively male. Perhaps it was exclusively white as well—on at least one occasion, at any rate, this is specified (p. 146). Understandably, even having been brought up in the independent African Methodist Episcopal church and exposed to black preachers (including some women), a free, black nineteenth-century Christian would have found it difficult, for many reasons, to conceptualize or visualize the ultimate authority in the universe in any other way.

When visiting the Watervliet Shakers in 1843, however, Jackson was impressed with a sequence of visions, in which Deity's female faces appeared to her for the first time, in a setting where such visions would have earned immediate respect rather than ridicule or opposition. The first was of Holy Mother Wisdom (the Shaker Sophia) as a face "like a full moon, with the glory of the sun reflecting from Her head," as she extended protective wings over the meeting of worshiping Believers. In Jackson's words, in response to "the Mother's look She gave me . . . my soul was filled with love and a motion was in my body, like one moving in the waves of the sea."

Following this first vision, Jackson had another of the mystical Bride and Groom of Scripture, in which (as she points out in the account) she saw the Bride first and found her altogether more impressive and beautiful than the Groom. When Jackson successfully averted a thunderstorm by prayer several months later, around the time of her brother's death, she was visited by "my heavenly Mother" in the presence of two companions. She could then write, "My Mother has abode with me ever since—this is the Bride, the Lamb's wife." There is little to indicate whether Jackson envisioned Holy Mother Wisdom as either white or black—beyond one description of a visionary woman with long black

35. The vision of a "Mother in the Deity" (p. 154) in 1835 is not very fully described, as compared with highly detailed visions of the feminine aspects of God after meeting the Shakers and hearing from them about Mother Ann Lee and Holy Mother Wisdom. Jackson's concern with grounding her doctrine on prior spiritual experience may have led her, in this case, to interpret a relatively minor early experience as a prophetic revelation of this major and radical aspect of Shaker theological doctrine.

hair, like Rebecca Perot's. Certainly she was shining and beautiful. Most probably she represented, for Jackson, a realm in which skin color was finally irrelevant.

Jackson's career as a female religious leader presents some striking parallels with that of Ann Lee, as Jackson was herself aware. Lee was a working-class Englishwoman, also an ecstatic, who emigrated to America on the eve of the Revolutionary War with a small band of followers and took advantage of the religious excitement sweeping through New England and New York State, in the wake of the Great Awakening, to proselytize for the redeemed life on earth. Jackson, like Ann Lee, was propelled into a leadership role primarily by virtue of ecstatic experience and vision and the ability to communicate her experience to others in a way that would enable them to make similarly radical changes in their lives. Both women mounted significant challenges to the doctrine and practice of established churches, using their claim to extraordinary, direct experience of the divine as a basis for this challenge. Perhaps most importantly, each woman chose to practice and advocate complete celibacy as an essential component of a redeemed life on earth. Each chose to assert her right to celibacy, as a married woman, for both personal and religious reasons. Insisting on this choice, despite the struggle it entailed, helped each woman win back for herself the autonomy and freedom of movement in public that were absolutely necessary for carving out a public career.

As a black American religious leader, Jackson's career is in at least one important respect very similar to that of Richard Allen, perhaps the best-known figure in nineteenth-century black church history. She did not match his achievement in founding a permanently viable black religious institution like the A.M.E. church, with its large membership and its profound impact on other organizational efforts of the free black communities in the northern cities before the Civil War and throughout the United States thereafter. Nevertheless, in confronting perceived discriminatory treatment of blacks within a white-dominated religious institution and in ultimately seeing the necessity of a separate, black-led church that would remain faithful to the religious ideals she had espoused, Jackson's achievement in founding her Philadelphia Shaker family can rank with Allen's.

The Philadelphia Shaker family survived Jackson's death by nearly forty years. Headed by Perot, who took the name "Mother Rebecca Jackson" after Jackson's death in 1871 (see fig. 15), the family involved between a dozen and twenty women at any given time, including some

white women. A few men were also associated with it in the 1870s when it had some connections with Philadelphia's spiritualistic community.[36]

Shaker records give interesting glimpses of the Philadelphia family during the 1870s. These suggest that it was a successful combination of some elements from Shakerism and others from the female praying band traditions developed under Methodism. A core group of the sisters lived together in a single large house, supporting themselves by daywork, as seamstresses or laundresses in the city. Other nonresident Believers lived in other areas of Philadelphia, sometimes at a considerable distance, and gathered with the resident sisters for Shaker services. White Shakers, visiting from Watervliet and New Lebanon in 1872, described the residence of the family in slightly awestruck terms, as "almost palatial" with its fully modern plumbing, central heating, "a large drawing room, sufficient for twenty souls to sit down," a carpeted meetingroom with "marble mantels . . . very nice, almost extravagantly so." Their description of the services that took place that evening, when various Spiritualist guests were present, is also thoroughly admiring. The sisters' religious "exercises were beautiful and zealous. . . . When they attempt a *shake,* they get right down, almost to the floor, and bow, bend, and strip off pride and bondage."[37]

Throughout the 1870s and into the 1880s, regular annual visits of

36. See "Names Associated with Philadelphia Shaker Family" in the Appendix. A list of members contained in a letter of the mid-1870s identifies seven women as black and nine as white and mentions three white men as members of the Philadelphia family (WR Correspondence, Community Unidentified, IV-A:87; letter dated 187– from "Edward" to "Beloved Elder ———"); notes taken by Alonzo G. Hollister during his visit to Philadelphia in 1878 list eight black women, three black children, and three white women (WR VI-B:39). At least one white female member of the family was Jewish. Perot herself was described by visiting Shaker brother Henry Blinn, on May 20, 1873, as "short, thick set, and unqualifiedly black. She spoke very pleasantly and readily entered into conversation concerning our gospel relation. Her kindness of heart would soon engage the affections of any Christian mind, provided that they were not prejudiced against color, a thing which in this house does not seem to be noticed"; "A journey to Kentucky in the year 1873," in *Shaker Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1965): 78.

37. At this same meeting, a white visitor was impressed to make a speech by the spirit of Abraham Lincoln: "I labored earnestly for your depressed race; I signed the Emancipation edict, that made your brothers and sisters free in body; but I had not the freedom of the soul to grant as you have; and I, too, have come here to get your blessing"; letter from George A. Lomas to a Watervliet elder, dated December 25, 1872 (WR Correspondence Watervliet, IV-A:83).

two or three weeks at a time were made by Watervliet and New Lebanon Shakers to Philadelphia. Eldress Paulina Bates acted as overseeing eldress from the parent community until her death in 1884.[38] Thereafter, contact was maintained primarily through visits by the Philadelphia sisters to Watervliet, though sometimes Shaker leaders would stop by Philadelphia en route to western Shaker communities. In 1889, for example, the travel journal of a New Lebanon eldress describes a brief visit with the sisters at 724 Erie Street:

> Sister Rebecca meets us at the door with a kind welcome to her home, and supplies our physical needs. Meeting in the evening. The little band of Believers there numbers twelve. Meeting nearly two hours long. If any people are clothed with zeal as with a garment, it is this "little band." Their sincerity and devotion is genuine. Their singing is peculiar, but it is given with force of spirit that impresses one they are under its power. Apartments are clean and Believer-like.[39]

In 1896, Rebecca Perot and three other aging Philadelphia Shaker sisters moved to Watervliet to live. (At least two other Philadelphia sisters had already done so.) Perot died in 1901 and was buried in the Watervliet cemetery. The last manuscript reference to the Philadelphia Shakers occurs in a notebook that Jackson's Shaker editor, Alonzo G. Hollister, kept on the Philadelphia family. When Perot moved to Watervliet, he had written, "I believe this ends Mother Jackson's colony in Philadelphia." But immediately after this note is another: "I have learned since, there is still a colony of Believers there, and zealous too. 1908." If this information was correct, the ultimate fate of the last of the Philadelphia Shaker sisterhood is shrouded in mystery.[40]

38. Shaker records refer to the Philadelphia family as Eldress Paulina's "flock" or "her colored society." One diarist calls them "her beloved darkies" (WR V-B:326, entries for June 11 and June 26, 1879, and September 27, 1880). Two years before her death, Paulina Bates was forced by illness to relinquish the duties of eldress, and Alvira Conklin replaced her.

39. WR V-B:172. According to Richard E. Williams, "in October 1858 a small residence on Erie Street in Philadelphia was established for meeting. Apparently, other residences on Peace and Ronaldson Streets were maintained at various times"; "Mother Rebecca Jackson: One of the Black Shakers in Philadelphia," *Shaker Messenger* 1, no. 3 (spring 1979): 4.

40. WR Scrapbooks, XIII-15. W. E. B. Du Bois mentions the existence of two Shaker households in Philadelphia's seventh ward in 1896, in *Philadelphia Negro*

Rebecca Cox Jackson's primary legacy, however, was not to be this surviving female spiritual "family," in which Shaker principles and ideas were transplanted in urban soil, in combination with black female traditions of religiosity and community. The writings in this volume constitute Jackson's lasting "gift" to "the world" that she left Watervliet to reach. Through her spiritual autobiography, readers who belong to the secular modern age can derive important information of a kind usually overlooked when historians write about America before the Civil War—information that can help us reconstruct what life felt like for "common people" of an earlier age. Jackson's readers can have a rarer experience as well: a guided tour into the heart of the discipline of ecstasy.

"I SAW ALL THAT I HELD FORTH": JACKSON AS A VISIONARY WRITER

Rebecca Jackson's writings describe an inner world to which few of us, with modern, secularized consciousness, have sustained or frequent access. She was able to capture states of consciousness in which waking personality, with all its quirks and defenses, drops away. Laws of nature are violated with ease, particularly in her accounts of visionary dreams. She soars, lifts, leaps easily into the sky, flies through the air, looks down from a great height, and can see things never visible from such a perspective before. She is given sudden, integrating flashes of understanding about the nature of the physical universe in visual form. She can leave the physical body behind, hold conversations with the angels, tour symbolic landscapes, and reenter the body again.

Jackson's mind was deeply engaged in contemplating, describing, interpreting, and reinterpreting such images and sequences of events from her inner world throughout her adult life. These images and events remain inviolably mysterious. Yet they can also move and shock us with their half-familiarity, over the gulf of a century and a half.

Her strengths as a writer are, not unexpectedly, more closely related to her skills as a visionist than to her undoubted abilities—testified to by the Shakers who heard her—as an orator. Though she was self-trained in the demanding oral rhetoric of religious testimonial, sermon-style scriptural exposition, and evangelical exhortation—"inciting" potential converts to heartfelt conversion experience—there is little in her writings

(p. 208). Since Rebecca Perot and her three family members moved to Watervliet in this same year, it is possible that they were included in this census.

to indicate that she saw her public styles of religious discourse to be applicable to her task as a writer.

The bulk of Jackson's writings are highly readable, plain-style narrative, although there are some long passages of theological exposition that may be difficult for the modern reader without a special interest in Shaker theology. She rarely attempts to evoke heightened emotional response by detailing her own emotions or by using inflated, "high-flown," euphemistic language, of the sort we identify with the magazine prose and poetry of the period. As a matter of fact, she shows a decided preference for understatement. The emotional restraint of her story-telling voice helps bring out the more effectively the natural drama of her experience—the sudden, unforeseen dislocations of daily life that occur when the divine intervenes. The comparative baldness of the style helps a reader share in the initial shock and wonder of the powerful, supernatural event, as experienced by the powerless individual.

Jackson's ability to record the very look and physical feel of dreams and visionary experience was extraordinary. Her fidelity to the seemingly senseless or mysterious details of dream happenings is admirable and must surely be related to her conviction that in writing, as in living, absolute loyalty to the divine word, even at times when it seemed wrong, was required. She alludes to explicit instructions received from her inner voice at the outset of her career to "write the things that I saw and heard, and to write them *as* I saw and heard."

Despite the fact that she received the gift of literacy in 1831, all Jackson's extant writings reflect a knowledge of, and commitment to, the Shaker way of life. By her own account, she could hardly have attained this knowledge firsthand, or made this emotional commitment, before 1843. Even so, it is unlikely that she wrote all of the material in this volume for the first time after 1843. Most probably, she was already in the practice of making short, dated entries in a commonplace book or journal by the time she first visited the Shakers. Encountering their intense interest in her prophecies and encouraged by their long-established practice of soliciting written testimonial from Believers with vivid stories to tell, she probably began in 1843 or 1844 to convert these earlier writings into a fully consecutive, narrative autobiography that would cover the period from her awakening through her discovery of Shakerism.[41] This process of composition would account both for the overlay of

41. Despite her claim to have read no book but the Bible in her early days of literacy, it is possible that Jackson was familiar with the style and substance of Jarena Lee's published autobiography. Lee had brought out the first edition of

Shaker perspective on her accounts of pre-Shaker religious experience and for the fact that the incomplete narrative autobiography ends in 1843, just after her impressive visit to Watervliet in the winter.

She asserted that any unusual or controversial religious conviction she espoused—any "new doctrine," as she called it—had first been experienced in visual or auditory form and only later conceptualized. As she put it more than once in her writings, "I saw all that I held forth—that is, with my spirit eye." She also emphasized, in writing about the period in her early career when she was challenging the A.M.E. church, that she had been placed under divine injunction to read no book but the Bible, once she had acquired literacy. Finally, she maintained that, even when she had Shaker books in her possession, she kept them for many years before actually reading them. Only after she had independently experienced the central truth of the "Mother in the Deity" concept, for example, did she read Shaker arguments for the existence of Holy Mother Wisdom. The point of all these assertions is clear enough. If she had admitted to receiving any of her most important ideas from books rather than from experience, she would have been laying herself open to attack as an ordinary sectarian. The fact that she moved from a black church environment into a largely white world of perfectionism

her religious memoirs in 1836 in Philadelphia. She sold them herself, at "camp-meetings, Quarterly meetings, in the public streets, etc" (*Religious Experience and Journal* [1849], p. 77). A second edition was published in Cincinnati in 1839, with 1,000 copies issued. At the end of that twenty-four-page book, Lee revealed something of her method of composition. On the final page, as the type becomes smaller and closer together, Lee writes: "But here I feel myself constrained to give over, as from the smallness of this pamphlet I cannot go through with the whole of my journal, as it would probably make a volume of two hundred pages: which, if the Lord be willing, may at some future day be published" (*Life and Religious Experience* [1839], p. 24). Lee apparently sought the support of the A.M.E. church book concern during the 1840s in order to bring out a much enlarged edition, which was to include a larger portion of her journal as well as her portrait (see fig. 8). The church book committee seems to have rejected it rather snobbishly on literary grounds, characterizing the manuscript in their First Annual Report of 1845 as "written in such a manner that it is impossible to decipher much of the meaning contained in it. We shall have to apply to Sister Lee to favor us with an explanation of such portions of the manuscript as are not understood by us" (Payne, *History of the A.M.E. Church,* pp. 178, 190). The enlarged edition did ultimately appear in 1849 published by Lee herself. At this time Jackson was residing at Watervliet, but she could well have had access to the 1849 edition through her continuing Philadelphia A.M.E. contacts.

and Shakerism in her middle career may have contributed to her vulnerability to such attacks, such as the one actually leveled at her by A.M.E. clergy that she was "chopping up the churches." On the other hand, if she had received all her religious radicalism through the direct, unassailable medium of divine revelation she was much better protected against such charges.

The narrative autobiography comprises all of parts 1 and 2 and most of part 3 in the present volume. In linking single events together into sequences in this narrative, Jackson employed a roughly chronological framework, within which some events are grouped together out of chronological order by thematic associations. The telling of one story suddenly touches off the memory of another, related through presence of the same characters, through usefulness in illustrating the same point, or in other ways. Her method is the storyteller's natural way of generating meaningful links between past events in the process of reviewing them. The illusion of being present as a person is discovering significance in his or her own history is a valuable and moving part of the experience of reading the best contemporary volumes of oral history. Jackson's modern readers can hear her making connections, thinking aloud about the meaning of events or sequences of events, to a lesser but still important extent. This revelation of her thought processes, however partial, seems very much worth having—although the narrative admittedly makes demands on a reader's alertness that a more strictly chronological ordering of events would not.

This autobiographical narrative survived in two substantially differing versions. Had Jackson supervised the preparation of her writings for publication, as did Jarena Lee, for example, she would undoubtedly have made decisions, which I could not presume to make, about which of two versions of a given event should reach the public eye. Seeming instances of self-contradiction or "rewriting history," then, in the first three parts of this volume, are usually simply a reflection of the modern editor's decision to publish all of the material in both versions of the autobiography—which itself exists only in an incomplete, unpolished, and unedited state.[42]

Even with the opportunity to finish the autobiography and supervise the publication of her writings, however, Jackson would not have displayed the kind of literary sophistication and sense of overall form that

42. See "A Note on the Text" for a description of the manuscripts that survive and my interpretation of their relationship to one another and to those that have not survived.

a reader of modern books routinely expects in a "writer." This is simply because Jackson was not a professional writer—she was a working, religious woman who attained literacy painfully, by her own efforts, in middle age. She most probably never read a piece of fiction in her life, and very little, if any, secular nonfiction. Her models for prose composition, beyond the Bible, would therefore have been the oral forms of religious testimonial and storytelling, as well as a very few pieces of published religious testimonial and theological tracts.

Jackson's inexperience with secular nonfictional narration only partly explains the comparative flatness of the writing that links the extraordinarily vivid and moving accounts of visionary experience. Another explanation comes to mind that seems more telling. Her lifelong, cultivated habit of excluding from her mind the distractions of external, ordinary, material reality, in order the better to concentrate upon the revelations occurring within, undoubtedly took its toll on her ability, as a writer, to reconstruct that ordinary reality.

As she wove together the peaks of her visionary experience, attempting to show how they related to her situation in the world outside her self, she often omitted crucial information that the modern reader would need to enter into her situation fully. There is very rarely any descriptive detail, for example, that would allow us to visualize the everyday scene—she does not show us what the rooms in her house looked like or describe the faces of her companions or persecutors.

More significantly, she neglects creating plausible psychological depth in her "characters." Her husband, Samuel, for example, emerges as intimidated, mystified, and frightened by her ecstatic experience, yet surprisingly supportive and touchingly protective in one or two early scenes. At some point he changes into her would-be murderer, but this transformation occurs offstage, and so his reappearance in this role leaves the reader bewildered. The same could be said for Jackson's characterizations of her early close women friends, Martha Low or Mary S. Lloyd, or even Mary Peterson. On the basis of the information Jackson gives about them, primarily in the form of snatches of dialogue, it is often difficult for a reader to adopt Jackson's sudden shifts in perspective on their characters and actions. Too much of the complex relationships has been left out. Again, the explanation is not simply literary. Rather, Jackson's refusal or inability as an autobiographer to "understand" and re-create for the reader the complexities and ambiguities of human personality seems a consequence of her world view, her understanding of the meaning of human life, and not simply lack of reading experience or writing skills. Her whole self-interest lay in the triumph of divine

energy over real and perceived evils and dangers. She had good reason to distrust appearances, to pierce through the deceptions of personality and seek depths where the forces of good and evil, opposed spirits, clashed in a timeless struggle. As she saw herself, so she saw others—as empowered and motivated primarily through choosing to obey or struggle against the divine will.

The best of Jackson's writing, her accounts of dreams and visionary experience, despite its immediate impact for a modern reader, is still a kind of sacred literature that should be interpreted cautiously, in historical context, in order to learn to appreciate it on its own, unfamiliar terms. It seems very likely, for example, that many of the figures, situations, images, and scenes in Jackson's visionary experience derive from a repertoire of visionary conventions, with which Jackson would have been familiar as a woman growing up in a black Methodist churchgoing environment in the early nineteenth century. Listening to the testimony in the praying bands and class meetings, she would have derived much of her sense of the fitness, the probability, the appropriateness, the meaning of certain kinds of visionary and spiritual events, the language in which divine power expressed itself. She would have known which dreams should be combed for prophetic meaning, which events revealed the hand of divinity behind the facade of nature. She alludes to this kind of rich, lifelong education in religiosity herself at least once, in reference to the difficulty she had in learning new truths from her inner instructor: "I was so buried in the depth of the tradition of my forefathers, that it did seem as if I never could be dug up." Much of this common vocabulary of dream symbol and visionary image would never have been written down at all. The autobiographies of two of her contemporary Methodist sisters, Elizabeth and Lee, as excerpted in the Appendix, show only a few threads from this fabric.[43]

From the point of view of the modern reader, unfamiliar with Jackson's traditional sources, some of the most memorable items in her visionary vocabulary are also among the most mysterious. In most of her dream accounts, for example, Jackson carefully locates the scene and describes movements by their geographical orientation—she finds herself in a room with a door in the north, she takes a road to the west, then sees a cloud in the northeast, and so on. Why the points of the compass are so essential in setting the scene in dreams we can only guess—is she

43. For a moving essay on the invisibility of American black women's creative accomplishments in the past, see Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," *Ms.* May 1974.

thinking of the arms of a cross, the twelve gates of the City, the four winds of earth? Her insistence on specifying directionality has the quality of ritual—nothing done once for sacred reasons can be omitted in reperformance. But what ritual? Is this part of a private mental world or part of a once public, though now obscure, cultural inheritance?[44]

The recurrence of certain images in the visions, in somewhat different guises, has the effect of suggesting imaginative themes, central concerns for Jackson at some level of consciousness. An instance of this is her repeated glimpse, in vision, of translucent, shining, sometimes streaming and fiery, sometimes smoky or misty, "glory" or radiance. It may take the form of a river, or of a beam connecting the divine with the human, or of a bank of fog blocking out all other sights.[45] Though it may have associations with the halo, that visual manifestation of divine nature so prominent in Christian art, it seems also on occasion to assume a sinister character, becoming the wrath of the Day of Judgment, for example. The image, or set of related images, has a kind of sensuous particularity that seems to locate it well outside the realm of religious stereotype, in a much more private source in Jackson's own imagination.

It should be emphasized that the esoteric elements in Jackson's visionary vocabulary are really much less typical than ordinary, everyday scenes, objects, persons, and events. As a matter of fact, it is precisely her ability to embed religious mystery squarely in the recognizable, commonplace reality in which we all live that constitutes one of her primary strengths as a visionary writer. The same concentrations and interests that can produce weakness in her narrative writing about her external life create intensity and drama, a particularly suspenseful fusion of familiarity and mystery, when she writes about dream and vision. In this other world,

44. There is also the possibility that Jackson worked with some kind of esoteric "code" or private language to convey a message that she did not want "outsiders" such as whites to understand—in the manner of coded references to slavery and white oppression that linger in black folklore and folksong. Her dream, for example, of saving one child who was being destroyed by another (December 24, 1847) might refer to white ill treatment of blacks in Philadelphia, though there is no overt reference to race. Jackson's Shaker editor, Alonzo G. Hollister, attempted an allegorical reading of one of her visions, using the points of the compass to refer to sectional conflict and Civil War battles (see part 1, n. 41). It was his purpose to show that her prophetic dream did actually predict the future. An effort to decode the geographical orientations given in the dreams by such a narrow "key" seems very likely to fail—even Hollister did not attempt it with more than this one dream.

45. See part 1, n. 51.

psychological plausibility and fully detailed settings and dialogues are not necessary or expected, would even seem an unwelcome intrusion from the world of waking rationality.

The woman reader, in particular, will be gripped by a sense of recognition when reading Rebecca Jackson's dreams. Aspects of their emotional "plots" have been referred to already, in discussions of the "Dream of Slaughter" and the "Dream at Ten Years of Age." But it is worth stressing again the frequency of dreams in which threats of sudden and irrational physical violence are the "problems"—poisonous snakes are concealed in blackberry bushes, a gulf of water is suddenly revealed under a platform where the dreamer is washing her quilts, a mob is seen dragging murdered women and children through the streets. It is also notable how often the "solution" proposed in the dream is either exquisite immobility or literal flight up and away—though there are important instances of heroism as well.[46]

Her dreams often incorporate the familiar female routine domestic labors—cooking, cleaning, sewing, caring for children. This work is frequently given symbolic interpretation when she wakes with a sense of divine meaning inhering in the dream. In "The Dream of the Cakes" (p. 99), for example, her skills as a cook turn out to symbolize and prophesy her nurturant ministry; or, in the dream of "The Gold Box and the Laurels" (p. 119), the sweeping brooms and brushes with which she attacks the dust in her house are interpreted by Jackson herself as the strenuous efforts she will make to bring about her own moral cleansing and transformation. To use these homely female labors as setting and symbolic actions in the dreams is both to convey to a female audience the dignity of this labor in the divine eye and to imply that, no matter how immersed in routine a woman may be, she can still read messages from the divine everywhere in her life. No special training in theology, or leisure for meditation, is necessary for a career as God's special agent among one's friends and peers, and even among

46. One impressive instance of Jackson's dream heroism occurs in "Vision of the Ruins" (p. 175), where she warns the white woman of their mutual danger, overcoming her fear of the white woman's reaction. Another is her refusal to leave her work when intimidated by a fierce eagle, in a dream dated March 17, 1849. There is also an interesting instance of Jackson's dreaming self registering an indirect criticism of Shaker pacifism, which she may have felt rendered them incapable of defending themselves. In a dream of July 13, 1848, she was attacked by a lion, and when she told James Ostrander to shoot it, it was revealed that the Shakers "don't have a gun," and she predicted that the lion would attack again.

strangers. By learning to pay close attention to communications from the divine, which are everywhere, and to interpret them, one can learn to foresee, and by implication control to some extent, the future.[47]

Because the most important unit of Rebecca Jackson's experience in her own eyes was the visionary event, her work as a writer is surely best appreciated and evaluated by measuring on oneself as a reader the accumulating impact of her accounts of these events. In their emotional intensity and verbal condensation, and in their delicate balancing of private and universal experience, the embedded dreams and visions have the power of lyric poems to challenge a reader to return and puzzle out their hidden meanings. They represent a kind of intimate but impersonal communication from one mind to another that is no less emotionally persuasive for being partial. It is similar in interesting ways to the kind of communication Jackson received from the divine within her—it makes demands on the recipient to change the way one usually listens or hears. At the same time, it holds out the reward of a new understanding of one's own being, a new power over one's own external experience. Modern readers have reason to be grateful to Rebecca Jackson for her willingness and ability, against all odds, to record her gifts of power and in the process to make a remarkable contribution to visionary literature and to our understanding of the American past.

47. Using dreams to foretell the future is an ancient art, widespread in the world's different cultures. Among its modern forms is the codification of elements of dream symbolism into "dream books," which in modern urban life are exploited by the gambling rackets—dream symbols also correspond to numbers, upon which one bets in the daily numbers game. It would be interesting to know how old the codified dream symbols in these books are—perhaps the books draw on sources that reach back into the nineteenth century. Jackson herself did not seem to interpret dream symbolism by any such highly codified system, however, as that indicated by this sample entry from the *National Dream Book* (Philadelphia: A to Z Dale Publications, 1933): "To dream you see a serpent twisting and turning signifies danger and imprisonment" (p. 46). The fact that Jackson interpreted and reinterpreted dreams up to three or four different times as her experience changed and her religious ideology developed also makes it unlikely that she worked with a code of this kind.

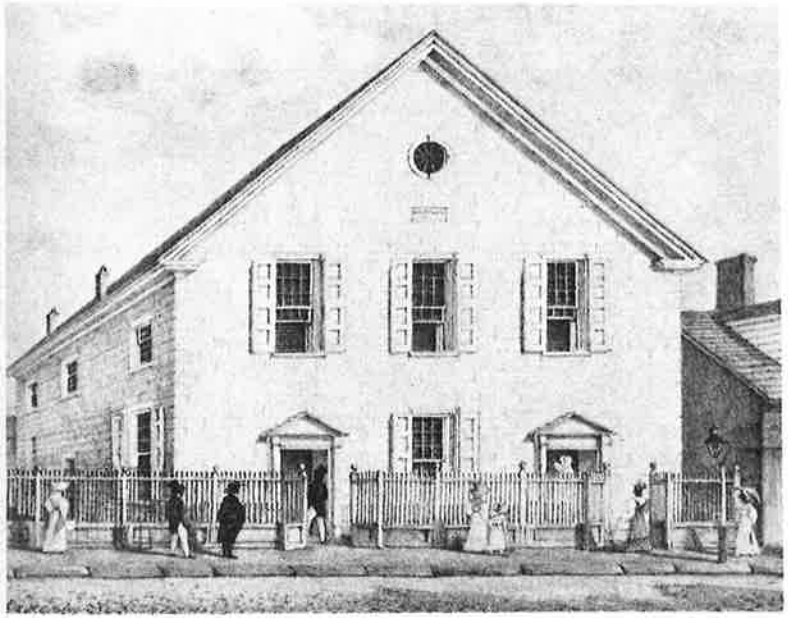


Figure 3. Bethel A.M.E. Church, Sixth Street, Philadelphia, in 1829