Miracles in The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Preachers

An Interdisciplinary Approach *

YAMASHITA　Yayoi **

Keywords ： Black women, Miracle, Christianity,

アメリカの黒人奴隷によって書かれたSlave Narrativeのなかで黒人宗教者（説教者）によって書かれたものはSpiritual Narrativeと呼ばれ、それらは自伝および自伝的な伝道記録（以下、自伝）である。黒人男性説教者によるSpiritual Narrativeは18世紀後半から19世紀初めにかけて多く出版され、黒人女性説教者によるものはその後約50年遅れて19世紀中ごろからとなる。本稿では4名の黒人女性説教家による自伝を取り上げ、それらに共通し特徴的である「奇跡体験に関する語り」に注目し、可能な限り広範な視点で考察することで、彼女たちの奇跡の語りはアフリカの宗教とアメリカのキリスト教がアメリカで統合されていく過程の中で創り出されたものであり、そこにはアメリカの宗教としての特徴がみられることをあきらかにした。

自伝のなかで黒人女性説教者たちは奇跡だけではなく聖書を自分たちのために、例えば、「人」は黒人を含み「女性」は黒人女性を含むというふうに読み替えている。この直解的な聖書の解釈はエバンジェリカルなアメリカの宗教の一面である。また、自伝やナラティブの証言からアフリカの宗教が何らかのかたちで黒人奴隷たちの間で実践されていたことは確かであろう。その伝統の一部と当時のアメリカの差別社会が黒人女性説教家たちに奇跡を語る役割を与えたと考えることが可能である。さらに、批評家Harold Bloomは南部黒人バプテストを例にアフリカン・アメリカンの宗教とアメリカの宗教はどちらもグノーシズム的要素があると指摘しているが、この要素は黒人女性説教家たちの自伝にも見られる。これらを総合的に判断すれば、黒人女性説教家たちは社会の差別と戦うために彼女たちの過去と現在を合体させ、現実に対応できうるかたちとして自伝の中で奇跡を語ったといえる。

本稿では、Slave Narrativeのなかでも宗教的なSpiritual Narrativeについて、主流であるテキスト分析に加えて、他分野からの黒人宗教に関する先行研究を活用し、広い視座をもってSlave Narrativeを研究することを試みた。その結果、部分的ではあるが、

---

* 19世紀黒人女性説教者たちの自伝における「奇跡」の学際的考察（山下　弥生）

** 大阪大学大学院言語文化研究科博士後期課程

テキストの背景に潜む歴史的、社会的、文化的意味を発見することができた。これはこの分野における研究のさらなる可能性を示すものである。

1 Introduction

It is well known that Phyllis Wheatley was the first black woman to publish poetry, in 1773.[1] It was originally rejected by white Americans, but her talent was eventually recognized. She was a pioneer of the African American literary tradition, and the tradition was passed down to other black writers secretly but surely.[2] They wrote poetry and novels, but especially narratives and autobiographies, in particular, autobiographical narratives which were called spiritual narratives, often written by religious leaders. From the late eighteenth-century, some male black clergymen started to publish their autobiographies.[3] About fifty years after these men's publications, women writers began to publish their works. Gradually, a number of black women preachers published their autobiographies or spiritual narratives, developing their own styles and expressing clear opinions, and some similarities may be found among them.

What is outstanding among the similarities is that black women writers sought recognition for their charismatic power. They mention supernatural religious experiences such as miracles and visions. Alice Walker appraises the writing of Rebecca C. Jackson which has many miracle stories in it as "an extraordinary document" and says, "It tells us much about the spirituality of human beings, especially of the interior spiritual resources of our mothers, and, because of this, makes an invaluable contribution to what we know of ourselves" (78). Surely enough, accounts of miracles can demonstrate the richness of women's spirituality. They make the reader feel as if women are special and give black women an opportunity to become aware of their power and strengthen their identity. Besides, it may be possible to find African origin in it and relate miracles and vestiges of ancient shamans or conjure women who acted like prophets. Yet, if we read the texts more closely, we can discover a certain view of social, cultural, historical, and political background behind their writings of supernatural experiences. After examining the texts and other social conditions, I came to sense that the conception of writing miracles in black

---

[1] *Poems on Various Subjects* first published in London in 1773.

[2] In the nineteenth century, in many states in America, teaching reading and writing to slaves was strictly prohibited by law. The African American writing tradition was handed down to a small number of self-educated writers.

[3] Some prominent male autobiographers are James Gronniosaw (1770), John Marrant (1785), and George White (1810.)

women's autobiographies has a strong connection with American religion as a whole.[4] In other words, black women preachers' words illustrate the sacred and secular, evangelical nature of American religion. It exactly shows a trace in the process of the development of African American religion.

In the following sections, looking at four representative black women preachers' spiritual narratives of the nineteenth-century, Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), Jarena Lee (1783-?), Julia A. J. Foote (1823-1900), and Rebecca C. Jackson (1795-1871),[5] I will show that black women writer's accounts of miracles represent an important aspect of African American religion while showing how the authors describe miracles in their autobiographies.

2 Miracles and the Interpretation of the Bible

2. 1 Black Women Preachers' Alternative Readings

One remarkable characteristic of black women autobiographers' writing is their alternative interpretation of the Bible. My thesis is that this tendency is a major characteristic of the black writing tradition and its rhetoric is worthy of examination. But, I will put more focus on holistic analysis than thoroughgoing textual analysis here. What made them read the Bible idiosyncratically? What does this reading mean? Why did they need to speak of miracles together with their free interpretation?

First, we should know the purpose of black women preachers' writing of autobiographies. In *Spiritual Narratives*, Sue E. Houchins describes their goals of writing. First, as blacks, they appealed to whites to recognize their human rights and sought to prove their capacity for learning, managing freedom responsibly, and religious salvation. Second, as women, they addressed the entire patriarchy. And third, as black women, they sought valorization for their arguments, like the black men and white women autobiographers who preceded them (Houchins xxx). As Houchins shows, all four women autobiographers

---

[4] Although the question of the relevance of black women spiritual narratives to American religion is too big to discuss in one paper, the theme of religion is indispensable when we think about America. Concerning the study of African American religion in particular, the major studies are dominated by sociologists, historians and theologians, such as W. E. B. DuBois (*The Negro Church*, 1903), E. F. Frazier (*The Negro Church in America*, 1963), J. H. Cone (*Black Theology and Black Power*, 1969) and C. E. Lincoln (*The Black Church Since Frazier*, 1974).

[5] Stewart's narrative is 84 pages long and was published by Friends of Freedom and Virtue. Foote and Lee published their narratives privately; Foote's is 124 pages long, while Lee's is 97 pages in length. Jackson's narrative is the longest (368 pages) ; it was edited and published together with her minor writings by the University of Massachusetts Press.

demonstrated these claims effectively by their alternative interpretation of the Bible.

For instance, in chapter 29 of her autobiography, with the title of "Love not the world," Julia A. J. Foote emphasized the supreme love of God and quoted Rom. xii. 2. as follows:

> Worldly honor, worldly pleasure, worldly grandeur, worldly designs and worldly pursuits are all incompatible with the love of the Father and with that kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, which is not of the world, but of God. Therefore, God says: "Be not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable. and perfect will of God." (117)

Foote also mentions, "The spirit which is in the world is widely different from the Spirit which is of God; yet many vainly imagine they can unite the two" (116). These words and many similar passages suggest that Foote was confident that the heavenly world is totally different from hers and discovered that everything on the earth is insignificant under God. The idea that it was a message from God to just trust His love only, without being deluded by worldly things, may easily have developed discursively into the idea that there is no need to conform or submit to anyone on the earth, including white oppressors.

In the following section of her autobiography, Foote develops this principle further with another quotation from the Bible, 1 Tim. ii. 9-10. to encourage black women to be spiritually mature.

> But, if the mind be renewed, it must affect the clothing. It is by the Word of God we are to be judged, not by our opinion of the Word; hence, to the law and the testimony. In a like manner the Word also says: "That women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broidered hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but which becometh a woman professing godliness, with good works." (117)

Here, she implies that "women" includes "black women," and possibly, offers an alternative interpretation beyond the conventional understanding of that passage, which is related to the meaning of "good works." Foote would have claimed the need of fair condition including education to fulfill "good works."

Concerning this series of quotations from the Bible, there is something curious about it. Actually, in the verses following 1 Tim. ii. 9-10. Paul writes more about women's behavior, in particular: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission," (10) "And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence" (11). Foote did not quote these verses. That is to say, it is evident that she quoted God's words selectively, and introduced them for her purpose.

Similarly, other authors present selective interpretations of the Bible in their autobiographies. As this practice was developed, women preachers also came to apply this manner to the incidents in their daily life. One time, when Jarena Lee's young son was sick, she was asked to preach at a place about thirty miles distant from her house. Lee wanted to stay at home to take care for her son, but she decided to go as asked. When Lee got home, her son was very sick but gradually recovered. Lee was relieved and determined: "I now began to think seriously of breaking up housekeeping, and forsaking all to preach the everlasting Gospel" (18). Lee understood that God would always support her as long as she had faith. In this way, black women preachers worked hard to preach the gospel to people, being conscious of combining the teachings of the Bible with humanity and women's rights. By interpreting the Bible and their everyday life freely and positively, black women preachers showed an example how to survive in the white-dominated society without losing pride and dignity as human beings.

2. 2 "Practical" Evangelism and Miracle as a Result

Koichi Mori, a specialist in the history of American religion, pointed out that one distinctive feature of American religion is "evangelical." Borrowing the word from a survey conducted by Princeton Religion Research Center, Mori introduces the basic definition of evangelism as follows: 1. experience of redemption and being born again, 2. active mission, and 3. literal belief in the Bible (17). In addition to Mori's argument, I think that these characteristics of "evangelism" are eminently practical and experiential. It is a historical fact that churches in New England especially, in Massachusetts colony, tried to maintain purity of membership with a system whereby a person who wanted to become a church member (a freeman or a citizen) had to profess their faith concretely, and for that purpose gradually adopted various methods that fit reality. Thus, American evangelism was forced to compromise with social reality. Looking at these four black women preachers' works from this perspective, they all filled and shared these three conditions of evan-

gelism, as the majority of black religious leaders were originally Methodist or Baptist. They showed practical aspects in the use of the Bible, just as I discussed in section 2.1. Black women preachers were directly and indirectly involved in political issues, too. Maria W. Stewart spoke her opinion very frankly:

> Or, if the colonizationists are real friend to Africa, let them expend the money which they collect, in erecting a college to educate her injured sons in this land of gospel light and liberty; for it would be most thankfully received on our part, and convince us of the truth of their professions, and save time, expense and anxiety. Let them place before us noble objects, worthy of pursuit, and see if we prove ourselves to be those unambitious negroes they term us. (69)

Now, let me comment on the relationship between this practical evangelism and miracle stories in these women's autobiographies. As I discussed in the previous section, it was difficult for black women preachers to continue as a minister in many ways. Black women preachers were constantly pressed to seek practical support. Foote confessed that she used to be a very shy timid woman, but, thanks to God's help, she became stronger and more independent: "This, my constant prayer, was answered, that I might be strengthened with might by his spirit in the inner man" (44). She perceived that she was able to understand God's word as a result of her strong faith. To some extent, Foote was rewarded. If I borrow James H. Cone's word, the reward was "hope" that was the locomotive of their power.[6] Concerning the practical side, all autobiographers mentioned that they received a message to go somewhere, and there, they met a member of their family with whom they had been out of contact for many years. For example, Foote who visited many of the poor and forsaken people after she got married mentions that, one day, she was "directed by the spirit" to visit the Marine Hospital in a dream. When she got there, she heard someone called her maiden name with a feeble voice. Coming closer to the cot, she recognized that the man who was dying in bed was her eldest brother who left home many years before (62). Dispersion of a family was a reality too, for black people and would have been appealing as a desirable result of strong faith in God.

---

[6] Cone advocates that black theology is the theology of liberation. He argues that the fundamental concept of black religion is God's righteousness, and emphasizes the theme that the oppressors will be punished and oppressed will be liberated by God. He mentions that idea of "hope" is relevant to strong faith in God as a liberator.

3 Relevance of African Origin

3. 1 Women as Competent Agents

Although many would think that black women preachers wrote miracles to imitate the Bible, there is a big difference between the miracle stories in the Bible and in black women preachers' autobiographies. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ healed many sick people, calmed tempests, and made wine from water. Jesus Christ performed discrete miracles to the general public. On the other hand, in many black women's writings, their miracles are dreams, hearing inner voices, visionary experiences, and foreseeing, not one time but again and again when it is needed. Though black women preachers witnessed some people being healed of their sickness miraculously, they made it clear that it was not they themselves but rather God who performed these miracles. All that black women preachers could do was pray that they might mediate between people and God to experience supernatural rituals of sanctification. In short, black women preachers' miracles are similar to the communication by a possessed shaman or a conjure-man in African religions.

As a majority of early black slaves were kidnapped from western Africa, Afro-American religions such as Voodoo in Haiti, Santeria in Cuba, and Pocomania in Jamaica are considered to have originated in the tribal religions of that area. And all those tribal religions such as Dahomey, have three common distinctions: multiple deities, music and dancing, and possessional phenomena in rituals. Actually, in black women preachers' narratives, there are descriptions of conjuration and witchcraft that tell us African religious traditions were widely practiced among slaves. Henry Bibb, who was a slave (1815-1854), wrote that he asked for an old man to conjure his slaveholder to evade severe punishment.

> After I had paid him his charge, he told me to go to the cow-pen after night, and get some fresh cow manure, and mix it with red pepper and white people's hair, all to be put into a pot over the fire, and scorched until it could be ground into snuff. I was then to sprinkle it about my master's bedroom, in his hat and boots, and it would prevent him from ever abusing me in any way. (Sernett 79)

Also, the writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, who diligently researched Voodoo, describes many ritual scenes of possessing and communication in her book *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica.* These accounts suggest that there is no

wonder if black people in the nineteenth century believed in certain personal shaman or conjure-man-like communication power. Rebecca C. Jackson, who established Black Shakers in Philadelphia, encouraged ecstatic experience during worship (26). Foote spoke as if she were communicating with God when she was nervous about starting preaching (68). Lee says she asked God when she wondered if Satan had deceived her about a vision, and He appeared and answered her again to clear her hesitation (11). All of these episodes suggest that the spirit of African religion and Christianity co-existed and co-worked in the black community.

The "conjure-man" in African religion was not limited either to men or to women. Rather, anyone can be possessed by God and communicate with Him as a messenger. Then you may question why black women especially wrote about miracles or appealed their charismatic power in their autobiographies, while black men rarely did so. Of course, black men experienced and wrote visions and miracles too. One notable example is Nat Turner (1800-1831), a religious black slave who frequently reported visions and was believed to be a prophet in his community. That he led the shocking slave rebellion (Nat Turner's Rebellion) in 1831 was said to have been in response to a message from God. Still, there are far fewer miracle stories in men's narratives and autobiographies.

One reason for this is related to the discrimination toward women at that time. To add to their daily hardships as blacks, black women preachers had to fight against conventional religious discrimination in society at large and from male religious leaders, both blacks and whites. Foote was told by her husband that she was getting more crazy and if she did not stop he would send her back home or to the crazy house (59). Although Lee was once given a license to preach at Richard Allen's church, after Allen died, the new bishop of that church denied her permission. Jackson suffered even greater abuse from church ministers:

> And there was three Methodist ministers that said I ought not to live. These three appointed what death I ought to die. One said I ought to be stoned to death, one said tarred and feathered and burnt, one said I ought to be put in a hogshead, driven full of spikes, and rolled down a hill. These men called themselves preachers of the Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. (149)

Under such conditions it was very difficult for women to do anything but domestic and pas-

sive activities such as "writing." Drawing on the traditional concept of mystical communicative power of black women, which would be more socially acceptable, black women tried to claim for their rights. They narrated miracles strategically and subversively. This is also true that their narrations of miracles were thus a symbolic scene that is seen during the period of African religion and Christianity syncretized.

Curiously, after showing several historical facts that there were many women who possessed magical power and were respected as such in Rome, Greek, and Egypt, Stewart mentions a reason why God gave her power and made her speak His gospel:

> If such women as are here described have once existed, be no longer astonished then, my brethren and friends, that God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive, by their example both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at present. No longer ridicule their efforts, it will be counted for sin. For God makes use of feeble means sometimes, to bring about his most exalted purposes. (77)

Stewart mentioned some ancient women's history in her autobiography. She syncretized African religious tradition and Christianity trying to improve black women's' position in the society. Stewart is the only one who discussed women's mysterious power and God's will from this point of view. No one knows whether her observation is true or not. But, miracle stories by black women preachers and discriminatory society at that time cannot be separated.

3. 2 Gnosticism

Next, I will introduce an argument by the literary critic Harold Bloom. In his book *The American Religion: The Emergence of The Post-Christian Nation*, Bloom, who identifies American religion as a variation of Gnosticism, claims that African American religion too is Gnostic, by examining Black Baptists (237).[7] After examining black women preachers' autobiographies, I was certain that his argument is true of black women authors. Several

[7] Bloom does not define Gnosticism clearly but he expresses it as follows: "It is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom" (49). Although his book devoted one chapter to prove the similarity of American religion and the African American religion, his concern is not black religion. A general understanding of Gnosticism is that it is one of ancient belief system or a doctrine of salvation by knowledge that was popular around the first and second centuries. Gnosticism values spiritual knowledge centrally to attain to God's sphere directly.

traits of Gnosticism are seen in their autobiographies. For example, Jackson mentioned that at first she experienced visual or auditory form and later she conceptualized them into doctrines (44). As many black women authors mention, by receiving messages directly from God, they could keep their strong faith and were energized to go out for preaching. Lee, whose journal is very factual, heard God's word, "Go preach the gospel." After that she began recording how long she traveled, where she visited, and what she preached to the congregation: "That year I traveled two thousand three hundred and twenty-five miles, and preached one hundred and seventy-eight sermons. Praise God for health and strength, O my soul, and magnify his name for protection through various scenes of life" (51). This is another characteristic of Gnosticism: individual direct relationship with the believer and God.

Above all, rituals in traditional African religion are individual and direct; this also suggests Gnosticism. Therefore, I can say the miracle stories in the autobiographies are a paradigm of American religion.

4. Conclusion

In the previous sections, I have shown that black women preachers interpreted not only miracles but also the text in the Bible freely and intentionally. They believed that the Bible was fundamental, as Foote says, "The bible is my chart; it is a chart and compass too, whose needle points forever true" (111). The synthesis of African religious tradition and Christianity gave birth to an American religion of African American religion, and it gave women a role, to speak of miracles.[8] Further, in regard to Gnosticism, African religion and American religion share that tradition. This accounts for some similarities between African American religion and American religion. All things considered, miracle stories in black women preachers' autobiographies shows a phase which was developed in the process of the synthesis of African religion and American Christianity in America. Black women preachers compounded their past and present and contributed to the development of African American identity and motivated them to fight against discrimination.

Finally, I would especially like to call attention to the following description of American religion by Bloom:

---

[8] Speaking of miracles is not peculiar or exclusive to black women in the nineteenth century, of course. People have spoken of them for as long as Christianity has existed. Yet, I think each generation of people meets miracle with different social, historical, and cultural background, and the meanings of miracles must be various.

> The essence of the American is the belief that God loves her or him, a conviction shared by nearly nine out of ten of us, according to a Gallup poll. To live in a country where the vast majority so enjoys God's affection is deeply moving, and perhaps an entire society can sustain being the object of so sublime a regard, which after all was granted only to King David in the whole of the Hebrew Bible. (17)

Bloom's view reminds me of the miracle stories in the autobiographies. Black women strongly believed that blacks would be saved. That assurance was absolute. To some extent, I can say that black women preachers' confidence was fostered by American culture.

In this paper, I studied a small group of powerless black women. Considering the meaning of miracle stories in their writings, I discovered a feature of the uniqueness of the African American religion that was not discussed much previously. Though I have not investigated some other important aspects such as the Great Awakening, it was a challenge to study black narratives from a different angle with a wider perspective in addition to text analyses. I believe many would acknowledge potential of this field of study and I hope that my research calls for the further investigation of black narratives.

Works Cited

Allen, Richard. *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen.* 1960. Bicentennial ed. Nashville: Abingdon P, 1983.

Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Cone, James H. *Speaking the Truth.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans P, 1986.

Foote, Julia A. J. *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketches by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote.* 1879. *Spiritual Narratives.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 1-124.

Jackson, Rebecca C. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress.* 1981. Comp. Jean McMahon Humez. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987.

Lee, Jarena. *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel.* 1849. *Spiritual Narratives.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

New York: Oxford UP, 1988.1-97.

Herskovits, Melville J. *The Myth of The Negro Past.* 1941. Boston: Beacon P, 1990.

Houchins, Sue E. Introduction. *Spiritual Narratives.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. xxix-xliv.

Mori, Koichi, ed. *Religion and the American Self-Image.* Tokyo: The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 1997.

The New Testament, New King James Version and The New Interconfessional Translation. Tokyo: Japan Bible Society. 1999.

Stewart, Maria W. *Mrs. Maria W. Stewart, Presented to The First American Baptist Church & Society, of The City of Boston.* 1835. *Spiritual Narratives.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 1-84.

Sernett, Milton C., ed. *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness.* 1999. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

Tateno, Junya. *Voodoo-Kyou no Sekai (The World of Voodoo: Deities and History of Haiti.)* Tokyo: Kikka-sha, 2001.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.* 1983. London: The Women's P, 2000.

Yamaguchi, Masao. *Ahurika no Shinwa-teki-Sekai (The Mythical World of Africa.)* 1971. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995.