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# My Mother Could Send up the Most Powerful Prayer: The Role of African American Slave Women in Evangelical Christianity

Sherry L. Abbott

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**MY MOTHER COULD SEND UP THE MOST POWERFUL PRAYER:  
THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVE WOMEN  
IN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY**

By

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B.A. University of Maine, 1995

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in History)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2003

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
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Evangelical Christianity swept through the South during the nineteenth century, permeating and redefining all aspects of social and cultural life. The traditional way to study this subject is through the history of the conversion of white women and African Americans, the power and expansion of certain denominations, and slaves' widespread use of religion as resistance. Yet something is missing within this history of Southern evangelical religion – the unique experience of African American women. This thesis addresses their experience, indicating that slave women found creative ways to assert their authority within immediate families and in their community.

The study specifically focuses upon the conversion experience of slave women, the role of mothers as religious mentors in the family, and the extension of this role into the entire slave community. It also explores the interactions between white women and slave women in the Southern evangelical society. The sources are drawn from former slave narratives gathered by Fisk University in Tennessee and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my grandmothers, Lucille Hicks Abbott and Ruth Winifred Hopkins Stevenson, and to my beautiful mother, Carol Stevenson Abbott.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my personal acknowledgments to my wonderful family for supporting me throughout this entire process. My special thanks go to my parents, Walter Hicks Abbott and Carol Stevenson Abbott. I thank them for their love and patience, and I hope that my work continues to make them proud.

I also give thanks to my brothers and their families: Steven Warren Abbott, Amy Allen Abbott, and Hannah Hopkins Abbott; and Scott Frederick Abbott, Stacie Lynn Reed, and Erin Elizabeth Reed-Abbott.

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## INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Christianity swept through the South during the nineteenth century, permeating and redefining all aspects of social and cultural life. The traditional way to study this subject is through the history of the conversion of white women and African Americans, the power and expansion of certain denominations, and slaves' widespread use of religion as resistance.<sup>1</sup> Yet something is missing within this history of Southern Evangelical religion—the unique experience of African American slave women. This study addresses their experience, indicating that slave women found creative ways to assert their authority within their families and in their community. Yet Christianity remained an inherently patriarchal religion and some of its imagery and symbolism infiltrated the slave community, affecting both the perception and actualization of women's religious power.

Religion plays a variety of roles in any society. It may serve as an institution in its own right, influencing historical change. Religion is also a means by which

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of slave religion serving as political and social resistance has been explored by a number of historians, including: Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Mechal Sobel, Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979); Sylvia Frey, Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).



individuals interpret their own lives, forge a sense of identity, and develop on a personal and community level the experience of worshipping God.<sup>2</sup> This study focuses on the latter interpretation of religion. It is not an exploration of the role of the established Evangelical churches—Baptists, Methodists, and African American denominations—as institutions; rather it demonstrates how slave women constructed their relationship with God through Christianity, and how through their faith they influenced their surrounding community. Most slaves belonged to no single denomination, thus throughout this study the term Evangelicalism will appear as a general term referring to no specific institution. The term instead will refer more broadly to a religious approach that emphasized a personal relationship with God. Also important in the Evangelical religions was undergoing an emotional conversion and rebirth, living a life of holiness, and demonstrating religious devotion by moral behavior. On this path to salvation, converts were encouraged to experience a strong comfort in God and religion.<sup>3</sup>

Southern Evangelicalism experienced a dramatic increase in power from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. First spread as a religion suited for the powerless, it emphasized the rising of the lower classes, the equality of all people, and the abolition of slavery. Preachers encouraged the creation of moral courage for all worshippers, giving confidence and self-esteem to Evangelical converts.<sup>4</sup> By forming networks and more solid institutions, the Evangelicals attained power and prestige, eventually reaching the status of respectability. The churches that previously espoused the overthrow of the elite transformed themselves into the dominant religion shaping

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane, eds., A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Raboteau, Slave Religion, 132. The support for abolition was short-lived among most white Evangelicals; however, the abolition movement always was of central importance to African American Christians.

social and cultural norms. In this transition, the opposition to slavery slipped into the background; many Evangelicals no longer defined slaveholding as a sin.<sup>5</sup>

This rise of Evangelical Christianity directly influenced the definition of the family and thus the lives of white women in the Old South. The concept of a family religion elevated the home over the official church in teaching morality. Nurturing children and encouraging their involvement with religion was a central role for women. Evangelical ministers encouraged women's familial influence, since in the nineteenth century white women became the majority of church members and they helped to prepare new converts. Christianity provided women with a space separate from their husbands and conversion allowed them to redefine themselves on their own terms.<sup>6</sup> Yet, religion also limited women, because their role was defined as complementary to men and their only power in domesticity and piety.

As these changes inspired by Evangelical Christianity swept through the South, they also reached deeply into the slave community. In the spirit of the Great Awakening, slaves converted to Christianity, especially as Baptists and Methodists. Many white Christians believed that the Bible sanctioned slaveholding since God permitted Hebrews to hold slaves and the Fourth Commandment ordered the authority of masters over servants.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, whites often permitted preaching on plantations by missionaries who asserted to slaveholders, "the discipline of the church was a useful means of reminding slaves of their duties toward their masters."<sup>8</sup> White Evangelicals followed a "mission to slaves" in which they attempted to appease slaves by encouraging African

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<sup>5</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 99, 104.

<sup>7</sup> Anne C. Loveland, Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 198-200.

<sup>8</sup> Raboteau, Slave Religion, 171.

American religious conversion. Through conversion, many owners and preachers hoped that slaves would learn to understand their place in life and still know that they were important before God.<sup>9</sup> Most whites believed that Evangelicalism for slaves provided paternalistic means of manipulating African Americans to serve in the established system of oppression.

Slaves, however, heard two messages: one emphasizing loyalty to their masters and the other stressing the pursuit of freedom and liberty through their faith.<sup>10</sup> The latter message had developed through slaves' own understanding of Christianity and then spread throughout the slave community. African Americans forged a means of expressing their fears and hopes by relying upon their new religion's emphasis on emotional conversion and devotion. The lack of formal religious instruction, required by most other religions, allowed uneducated slaves to express their piety within the informal parameters of Evangelicalism. They formed their own way of expressing their beliefs that blended with African traditions and emerged as a unique African American Christianity that spoke directly to the needs of slaves.<sup>11</sup>

Slave religion belonged in both the public and private realms. Some slaves attended formal mixed race or black churches, while most participated in informal, often secret, religious ceremonies in their quarters or in the woods. Free African American preachers emerged as one important public presence in the South. Baptists and Methodists did not insist on a formally educated clergy and believed that "a converted heart and a gifted tongue were more important than the amount of theological training

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<sup>9</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 140-43.

<sup>10</sup> Juster and MacFarlane, A Mighty Baptism, 10.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the important influence of African culture on shaping the views of African Americans and how this in turn contributed to their Christianity, refer to some of the following texts: Joseph E. Holloway, ed., Africanisms in American Culture (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); Raboteau, Slave Religion; Sobel, Trabelin' On.

received.”<sup>12</sup> Churches officially licensed many black preachers, especially at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Even as black church control shifted to whites in the antebellum period due to the threat of slave revolts, black preachers still played an important leadership role for the public Evangelical services. Slave preachers also wielded influence among other African Americans, conducting marriage ceremonies, funerals, and preaching sermons. They often preached in informal or secret meetings addressing the psychological and religious needs of slaves and providing more intimate instruction for their community. Most often in the private realm, they helped to nurture religious developments and advised on conversion without any influence from white masters or missionaries.<sup>13</sup>

Yet preaching, regardless of race, was dominated by men. White and African American women exhorted and prayed in services, but preaching was definitely a male domain. According to Susan Lindley, “women clearly exercised religious leadership;” however, this extended to ordination or preaching only in exceptional circumstances.<sup>14</sup> This distinction emerges as female slaves often heard a “call to pray” in their conversion visions, while their male counterparts remembered a “call to preach.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Raboteau, Slave Religion, 133.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Hill Lindley, You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117. Women did lead prayers and in some instances this can be extended to say that they “preached.” But according to Lindley, extending this term to women’s role in early to mid-nineteenth century is a “slippery” concept. This thesis chooses to delineate clearly the role of praying, shouting, and exhorting from the role of preaching. Leading prayer is informal and preaching is considered more formal. Even though many slave preachers were not ordained, they did serve as preachers in a much more formal manner than any women slaves described in the narratives reviewed for this study.

<sup>15</sup> Many examples of these differences emerge in the narratives included in: George P. Rawick, ed., God Struck Me Dead, vol. 19 of The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972).

Even in light of these gender differences, religion became a social force that gave all slaves legitimacy, provided cultural meanings for their community, and served as a form of political resistance. Slaves understood that the doctrine of Christianity undermined the institution of slavery upon which the South relied. Evangelical religion encouraged independent relationships with God and raised the issue of spirituality inherent in each human being.<sup>16</sup> The implications of their Christian religion surfaced as political, as well as provided a valuable faith in God for slaves. Evangelicalism gave slaves a language with which to express their hopes for freedom and goals for attaining it—even if only in the afterlife. It also eased their fears and strengthened their courage for facing everyday life.

As Eugene Genovese stated in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: “Religion expresses the antagonisms between the life of the individual and that of society and between the life of civil society and that of political society, it cannot escape being profoundly political.”<sup>17</sup> A more inclusive definition of the term political includes religious activities outside of traditional formal politics and indicates that religion served as a means for resistance of slavery. For example, private meetings in “hush harbors”<sup>18</sup> and turning the kettle down to catch the sound of their prayers<sup>19</sup> directly indicate that African Americans did not want whites to discover their activities. This in turn shows that both slaves and their white owners recognized the subversive nature of their religious practices.

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<sup>16</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 46.

<sup>17</sup> Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 162.

<sup>18</sup> Hush harbors served as quiet gathering places and informal altars where slaves could worship.

<sup>19</sup> Turning down the kettle or pot served as a symbol that when slaves gathered around an overturned pot, it would catch their voices so that they would neither echo nor be heard by slaveholders.

Within this broad portrait of religious life in the antebellum South remains one unexplored issue, the role of African American slave women in Evangelical Christianity. Considering the fact that the religious activity of slaves had serious political and social implications against white culture, it must also be true that it had equally valid implications within the slave community. The notion that slaves used religion as resistance and white women used it as a place for psychological redefinition<sup>20</sup> leaves out the issue of how slave women understood their place in Evangelicalism. Considering the significance of both race and gender in shaping both Evangelical Christianity and Southern society, the logical conclusion is that the experience of slave women was inherently unique.

In order to remain faithful to the concept of religion as personal experience, this study relies upon the words of former slaves in interpreting women's role in Christianity. Narratives collected by Fisk University in Tennessee and by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration are the primary sources. The Fisk narratives offer the first effort to gather both religious conversion stories and verbal autobiographies from former slaves in the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> Two African Americans, A.P. Watson and Mrs. Ophelia Settle Egypt, gathered the narratives during the 1920s. The Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration collected the narratives between 1936 and

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<sup>20</sup> Religion provided an opportunity for white women to form relationships outside of the home and an opportunity for leadership in the community. At the same time, it allowed them to be moral leaders within the home. For more a discussion of white women's religious experiences, see Lindley, You Have Stept Out of Your Place, 39-69.

<sup>21</sup> Paul D. Escott, Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 3. Fisk University, a traditionally black school, was first founded to educate former slaves. In 1927, A. P. Watson, a graduate student in anthropology, collected the first set of narratives, which are religious conversion stories and published as: Rawick, God Struck Me Dead. Mrs. Ophelia Settle Egypt of the Social Science Institute at Fisk interviewed more than one hundred former slaves in 1929 and 1930. Her studies were published as: George P. Rawick, ed., Unwritten History of Slavery, vol. 18 of The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972).

1938. Both African American and white interviewers talked with two thousand former slaves in seventeen states. The interviews focus on suggested topics including the experiences of slaves, relations with owners, and experiences during the Civil War. There was also a focus on religious activities and family history.<sup>22</sup> Collectively, the narratives provide a unique and valuable source that answer many questions pertaining to the social and cultural aspects of slavery.

As a source, both collections of narratives do have weaknesses. The foremost concern includes the former slaves' perception of slavery and their experiences because many of them were young children at the beginning of the Civil War. In addition, the possibility of memory failure by former slaves at the time of their interviews, the lack of openness of some black interviewees to the white interviewers, and the lack of a scientific random sampling all contribute to the problems. Furthermore, many former slaves were unable to speak accurately about the work performed during slavery. The sampling appears to have included a preponderance of house workers over field workers.

Nevertheless, the narratives do provide significant insight into the institution of slavery and cultural experiences of African Americans in the mid-nineteenth century South.<sup>23</sup> As in all oral history projects, the historian must consider the biases and

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<sup>22</sup> Escott, Slavery Remembered, 4,5. The interviewers hired by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration gathered over ten thousand pages between 1936 and 1938; later most of their findings were placed in the Library of Congress. The entire collection of Fisk University and Works Progress Administration narratives are published in multiple volumes. George P. Rawick, ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography 19 vols., (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972); George P. Rawick, ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement Series 1, 12 vols., (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1977); George P. Rawick, ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement Series 2, 10 vols., (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Charles T. Davis, eds., The Slave's Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), including essays that critique the narratives as an historical source. There are valid criticisms of the narratives, as acknowledged in this paper, yet they are also a rich oral history that needs to be explored and analyzed.

limitations of the interviewee to discover the useful information. The narratives provide an understanding of cultural issues, such as family life, religion, and resistance; these oral histories offer a unique perspective into most aspects of slavery. As stated by Paul D. Escott, “The slave narratives offer the best evidence we will ever have on the feelings and attitudes of America’s slaves.”<sup>24</sup> When considering the specifics of religion, this is especially relevant. If religion is interpreted as a significantly personal experience, then the impact of religion on the lives of former slaves can be studied most effectively by analyzing their own words.

The sources for this study are mostly drawn from the mid-South and border states, including Tennessee, Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, North Carolina, and West Virginia. The choice of these states is based on the fact that most African Americans worked on plantations that included interaction with whites, that most plantations farmed similar crops, and that most plantations maintained moderate sized slave populations. The experience of slaves on the plantations in this region often differed from those in states, such as South Carolina or Mississippi, which included much larger plantations and where slaves experienced less interaction with the surrounding white community. Many of the narratives gathered from these states are from slaves who lived in other locations during slavery. In this case, they have been selectively studied so that the material is taken from those former slaves who served on border state plantations.

Along with the limits placed by geography, this thesis is also limited by time because this thesis does not extend beyond the end of the Civil War era. The narratives were gathered during the 1920s and 1930s; however, some discrepancy does exist about the ages of the interviewees during slavery. Many narratives refer to the Reconstruction period. Special care was taken to analyze sources that clearly referred to the antebellum and Civil War periods. These years fall after the end of the Second Great Awakening,

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<sup>24</sup> Escott, Slavery Remembered, 18.



but still reflect its fervor; they occur during and immediately after the mission to convert slaves.

Employing both the Fisk narratives and the WPA narratives, this study explores the significance of the Evangelical experience for African American slave women on the eve of the Civil War. It depicts their role in the slave community and in their families, as well as how their religious lives varied from those of white women. The first chapter explores slave women's personal experiences and their role of spiritual guide as pertaining specifically to the religious conversion. Continuing on this theme, chapter two emphasizes the ways in which slave women used Christianity to exercise their freedom and to find comfort and solace in an insecure world. The chapter focuses on mothers' importance in the family, how religion served as a way to guide their families spiritually, and the various religious traditions that the African American community valued.

Chapter three compares the experience of white women and African American slave women in Evangelical religion. It also describes, from the perspective of the narratives, white women's interaction with the slave community on antebellum plantations. Chapter four depicts the manner in which women used this increased sense of self worth to assert leadership in their community. Slave women's leadership had impact beyond the confines of the immediate family; it reached extended kin and the rest of the slave community. This meant that women transcended into a place of influence within their entire society.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **CONVERSION**

Although Evangelicalism had developed into the dominant social force in Southern society prior to the Civil War, its teachings continued to emphasize the personal relationship with God which resulted in and encouraged slaves' religious fervor. Conversion provided personal power because it offered an opportunity to pray for freedom and to identify with a higher calling. Not all conversions were documented or were part of an official church record; however, the significance of the conversion experience was one that provided slaves with a sense of self-esteem and confidence that would continue with them well after the war.

The conversion experience provided African American slaves with a means to express faith, conviction, and hope in a world that otherwise seemed to offer no escape. According to Donald G. Mathews, conversion to Christianity offered African Americans "a means of establishing their claim upon the Christian care, respect, and love." These feelings had "egalitarian implications" for slaves because "the inner lives of all persons had to be valued." Mathews stated, "The conversion experience of zealous Africans somehow became a prelude to ardent emancipationism." Furthermore, the "extension of personal experience into the historical process [and] the act of redirecting one's private destiny in the ways of holiness" provided some Evangelicals the power to challenge

slavery.<sup>25</sup> With this newfound ability to reject the past and pray for a new future, many slaves converted to Evangelical Christianity.

The conversion experience itself was significant for a variety of reasons. First and foremost it provided a ritualized manner for all converts to express their newfound faith in God. The pattern followed after a person experienced a sense of anxiety over salvation and recognized his/her own sinfulness. A person then would feel God's grace and receive a pardon. Conversions occurred in many different ways, and either alone or in a religious meeting. The most significant aspect of this religious experience was that the expression of religious faith meant that the convert was forgiven by God and gained hope of salvation.

Conversion held a considerable place in the lives of African American slave women. As Lindley stated in *You Have Stept Out of Your Place*, "In a culture that placed black females at the bottom of a hierarchy of human value, conversion gave black women a sense of increased self-esteem, personal worth, and dignity rooted in God's validation of their humanity."<sup>26</sup> Women gained confidence by feeling protected by God and they found a valuable means of facing the oppression they experienced based on both their gender and their race. Slave women could pray as a means to express anger and know that in a religious sense God and other Evangelicals recognized their humanity.

A major aspect of many African American conversions and other personal religious experiences was the vision. African traditions of spirit possession and other forms of religious expression were combined with Evangelical traditions of conversion.<sup>27</sup> Most narratives that include a reference to religious conversion describe a vision in which a person hears voices and sees images. According to Jean E. Friedman, "The vision

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<sup>25</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 67-68.

<sup>26</sup> Lindley, You Have Stept Out of Your Place, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 208.

served as part of an initiation rite. . . . The vision was repeated in various motifs, but was known to all. What the slaves ‘saw’ and experienced were cultural variants of Christian symbols for creation, freedom, and salvation.”<sup>28</sup> These visions provided an authentic religious calling and proved that a person had a legitimate desire to become an Evangelical Christian.

The conversion was the penultimate experience prior to salvation. Even though each story maintains its own extremely personal variations, many conversion narratives included similar circumstances. Often they begin discussing anxiety over their current situation, including sinful living, sadness, or nervousness about salvation. Many narrators reference a conversation with a mentor or preacher prior to conversion. The narratives usually include a direct interaction with Jesus, a spirit, or a “little man” who would guide the convert through hell and then to heaven. Also, the stories mention specific words spoken from God. Another significant aspect of the narratives is the symbolic death and rebirth – many former slaves state that they “died” in the narratives or that they experienced a burning throughout their bodies. These physical descriptions represent the significant changes they experience when converting to a new religion and leaving behind their past.<sup>29</sup>

Many examples of women’s conversion experiences are present in both the Fisk University and WPA narratives. The most valuable source is the collection of conversion stories entitled *God Struck Me Dead*, gathered by researchers at Fisk University. They clearly follow the standard pattern of the conversion as expected by Evangelical religions. Included in this conversion experience was a belief in a transformation of personality through the individual’s personal encounter with God. According to Donald

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<sup>28</sup> Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830 – 1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 71-72.

<sup>29</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 266-71; Rawick, *God Struck Me Dead*, iv – xi.

Mathews, this conversion allowed not only a personal rebirth and newfound integrity, but also the ability to join in a new community.<sup>30</sup> By participating in a ritual experience, converts gained personal strength and became members of a growing group of believers. This was especially significant for slaves because they were allowed a spiritual rebirth, which allowed them to “reject the past.”<sup>31</sup>

One former slave recalled her conversion experience and how it provided her with a strong personal sense of identity:

When the Lord started me out I prayed two or three weeks. He freed my soul between two and three. . . . He came to me at the east part of the world and said, “Alice, you must die and go to hell this day.” I fell down and said, “Have mercy on me.” On the third day He came and repeated it. . . . Tears came from my eyes and I cried, “Lord Have mercy and what shall I do?” I fell over and hit the door step and my mother came and picked me up. . . . I then seed myself baptized. The Lord was standing in the middle of the river and told me to follow Him. He had a staff in His hand and I was baptized in the water in Stone River.<sup>32</sup>

She specifically described the strength and freedom that she felt after experiencing her spiritual rebirth.

Another slave, Mary, described her conversion in which she first tried to feign a spiritual rebirth to those around her, and only later did she actually have a meaningful religious experience:

After I was fifteen they told me I should get religion. I asked what that was and they scolded me so greatly that I decided to try and get one. I thought, one time, that I had got religion but I had not seen anything special to convince them that I had been converted. . . . When the next revival started I began at once to seek religion and I found the Lord

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<sup>30</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>32</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 71.

precious to my soul. When I was converted I had gone about five days without eating.

She then heard a voice say: “‘Rise, Mary.’...Then I jumped up and shouted to the Lord and started singing: Give me that good old-time religion. This I sang and I felt a burning in my heart.”<sup>33</sup> Mary’s experience indicates that she attempted to conform to Evangelical conversion standards to please others; however, it was only when Mary truly believed in the conversion process that it gave her emotional strength.

Slaves often encountered religious instruction in informal settings, which in turn inspired them to pray on their own. A former slave from Tennessee emulated her Mother and Aunt’s religious practices:

My mother was a good old time Christian woman. Me and my sister used to lay in the bed at night and listen to her and my aunt talk about what God had done for them. From this I began to feel like I wanted to be a Christian. I got so that I tried to pray like I heard them pray. I didn’t know what it meant. I hardly know what I said half the time. . . . I had got so I prayed a lot and more I prayed it look like the worse off I got. . . . I got so I felt heavy and burdened down again. My mother noticed it and asked me what was the matter. I told her I had heard a voice that I had been trying to pray. She clapped her hands. She said, “Pray on, daughter, for if the Master has started working with you, He will not stop until He has freed your soul.” It wasn’t long after this before I died.

This language demonstrates the powerful influence that women had on their children and others in the community. Here, she received instruction and encouragement from her mother until she experienced her spiritual death and rebirth.

A former slave, Martha, expressed how important her personal relationship with God was in giving her strength: “I was born a slave and have lived through some very hard times. If it had not been for my God, I don’t know what I would have done. Through his mercy I was lifted up. . . . I have prayed ever since I was big enough to call on God...And after the war I continued to pray.” She also recalled her conversion

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 98.

experience while as a young girl in which she died, saw a club footed man, and then was reborn. She was greeted by God: "When I came to myself I looked at my hands and my hands looked new; I looked at my feet and my feet looked new. I began shouting and praising God."<sup>34</sup> After the intensity of her conversion, Martha rejected her past and viewed herself as a new person. This demonstrates the significance of conversion in allowing a slave to assert a new identity as a Christian.

Many narratives emphasize the happiness and confidence that a religious vision brought to their lives. One woman recalled:

I am always glad to talk about God because without Him I can't do nothing. I have looked to Him and trusted Him for my journey ever since that morning He freed my soul and told me that He was my Father and that I was His child and that He was more than the whole world against me.

Her vision began: "As I started to milk the last cow a voice spoke to me that sounded like it might be coming from the cow and it said 'My little one, I will redeem your soul. Fear not, for I come quickly and I will never forsake or leave you.'"<sup>35</sup> Her narrative emphasized that she would always have someone to care for her and this gave her a strong feeling of comfort and confidence. These feelings were especially important for slaves who faced the threat of being sold to distant plantations at any time.

Slave women also played an important role in the conversion process of others, since they often helped to provide support to their own children as well as to extended kin. Although spiritual rebirth often fit within a specified formula to meet community expectations, it remained intensely personal. Even within the defined parameters, the conversion experience served as a vital expression of slaves' religious feelings.<sup>36</sup> Those

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., iv.

who did not understand the full implications of conversion, especially young people, needed help interpreting their feelings. With the absence of an accessible established clergy, slave children most often turned to female members of the slave community to gain insight into their experiences. In turn, mothers pushed their children to convert by emphasizing religious teachings when raising their children.

In one narrative, a woman stated that a voice spoke to her: "I jumped up and shouted to the Lord and started singing. . . . I sang all the rest of the day and felt a burning in my heart and a great burden seemed to have left me." She felt relief, but turned to her mother for confirmation of her feelings: "I told my mother what had happened. She kissed me many times and told me that I had been converted and I went my way rejoicing."<sup>37</sup> The woman's description of the burden being lifted clearly indicates that her religious conversion brought her solace and even optimism. At the same time, however, she also felt confusion. Her mother's validation of her experience provided a final confirmation that her new feelings were a legitimate religious faith.

Another woman turned to her grandmother after experiencing a vision:

I ain't never had but one real vision, and it come to me one day. You know I always wuz religious inclined from a child. I was going down the main street . . . and something came over me—something like a light and it just seem to lift me up and then it got down at my feet, and it just seem to stay there, and I felt so different, and that light kept worrying me. I never heard a word said, it was just that light. . . . I told my grandma and she say that the spirit of the Lord was touching me.<sup>38</sup>

She clearly described positive emotions about her conversion, yet she also felt scared by her feelings. Her grandmother explained the significance of her vision and through the explanation she was able to comprehend fully her spiritual transformation.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>38</sup> Rawick, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 320-21.



Women also encouraged religious converts to pray. For instance, a former slave, Kellie, described in a narrative her conversion to Christianity and the important role her aunt played in advising her:

I was young, and I knowed no more about it than this here rock, but I sho' felt something and I heard something too. Well, by and by I kinda got composed and went on up to the house. I didn't know nothin' 'bout it, cept'n I felt funny and sorta light, and I went on in the house and told ole Aunt July. She said, "Chile, jest hold yo' peace, you done been left in God's hands." Well, you know I didn't know what that meant, now you know I was ignorant, jest young, you know. Aunt July told me to pray, pray.<sup>39</sup>

At twelve years old, she clearly needed support and first turned to her Aunt, not only a family member, but also a Christian woman experienced in the conversion process.

In a similar story, a young girl described that she had heard the voice of God and began to pray: "I began to pray for my soul more and more and began to hurry to God. . . . My husband and neighbors thought I had lost my mind so they sent for my mother. She came and told me to pray. At that very minute I was praying on the inside, 'Lord have mercy on me.'"<sup>40</sup> This demonstrates the importance of her mother in helping her to interpret the intensity of her conversion and her desire for religious salvation. Another aunt told her nephew, "All right son, pray on, God will come after a while."<sup>41</sup> And yet another former slave recalled that he prayed to see his mother again; "I was converted in a peculiar way. . . . I had to get down on my knees and stay there for several days until the Lord freed my soul from the gates of hell. He did that because I asked Him to show me my mother who had been dead about twenty years."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>40</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 151.

A former slave claimed that as a young girl she turned to her mother after experiencing a conversion in which she felt her soul was dying:

God first spoke to me when I was eight years old. I was down in the thicket getting some brush to kindle a fire. A voice called from I don't know where saying, "O ye generation of vipers! Who had warned you to flee from the wrath to come? My little one you are now eight years old. Go and ask the Lord to have mercy on your dying soul." I was so scared that I couldn't move. Finally I came to myself and ran home to tell mama what I had heard. She told me to pray and said, "Daughter, it is true that you are eight years old." From this time on, I went often to the peach orchard and prayed.<sup>43</sup>

As she faced her sinfulness, she turned to her mother to help her to understand what was required of her during such an important time in her religious life. Her mother's instruction inspired her to pray and she continued on her path to conversion.

Another significant part of both conversions and religious visions was the calling to preach or pray. A major difference based on gender exists in the narratives, since only men recalled being asked by God to preach. According to evidence in the narratives, a calling from God allowed only slave men to undertake the position of preacher. In many of the men's narratives their call to preach and their confidence in their ability to lead demonstrate that at that time men did not question the ability to serve in a more formal leadership role.

Former male slaves recollected through many conversion stories that God instructed them to become preachers. A man recalled: "A soft voice saying, 'My little one, I have loved you with an everlasting love. You are this day made alive and freed from hell. Go and I am with you. Preach the Gospel and I will preach with you.'"<sup>44</sup> One

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 3.

narrative described a young man's journey to Evangelicalism: "God started on me when I was a little boy. I used to grieve a lot over my mother. She had been sold away from me and taken a long way off." The man recalled that after having many visions and praying, he finally heard God say to him; "Go preach my Gospel to every creature and fear not for I am with you, an everlasting prop."<sup>45</sup> Another former slave recalled, "The first thought that struck me after I had the vision in the field was that I must go and preach."<sup>46</sup>

Some men even remembered that they had a lack of faith in their abilities, but clearly noted that God specifically instructed them to preach. A former slave expressed his self-doubt, stating that God not only instructed him once to preach: "I call you to preach the gospel," but also a second time: "Go in peace and fear not for a teacher and preacher shalt thou be and many shall hear thee and believe."<sup>47</sup> The man heard two specific messages before he would go forward; however, he knew that he had the right and the calling to become a preacher because God spoke to him, a man.

Women, however, never recalled receiving instructions to preach in their conversions. More often they retold their conversion stories emphasizing that God or a spirit directly promised to care for them and to show them the way to salvation. A former female slave remembered a voice telling her at a young age, "Follow me, my little one, and I will show you the marvelous works of God."<sup>48</sup> Another woman stated that a voice called to her: "My little one, fear not, for I will hover over you like a hen over her chickens. Believe and be of good cheer. You are my child and all hell is not able to pluck you out of my hands."<sup>49</sup> Clearly the images in the conversion experiences

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 7, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 27.

emphasize that women needed protection, care, and guidance in order to reach religious salvation. In addition, this conversion narrative utilizes a significantly maternal imagery in describing conversion itself. This is an important demonstration of the significance of women and women's ideology in slave Christianity.

Some women stated that they did receive instruction to pray or speak from their visions, which can be translated into validating their religious leadership. One woman recalled: "Jesus himself baptized me saying, 'My little one, behold I have baptized you myself. I command you to go in yonder world. Open your mouth and I will speak through you.'" She stated many times in her narrative that she had instructions to pray and to tell who had freed her soul. However, she never articulated these instructions as a calling to preach, only as instructions to pray. The difference between preaching and prayer may appear slight, yet it is significant. A calling to preach brought along with it the status of a "preacher" who immediately gained recognition from the community. Prayer was often a form of worship that was centered around the family or in a domestic setting.

Another woman stated that in a vision God said to her, "My little one, go and I go with you." She recalled that she responded in the vision by saying: "Lord, they won't believe what I say." To which she remembered God replying: "My little one, I have cast your sins in the sea of forgetfulness. Go as I have commanded you; open your mouth and I will speak through you."<sup>50</sup> Again, the vision instilled in her the power to spread the word of God; however, she did not feel that becoming a preacher was part of the message.

As indicated by the previous examples, religious conversion played a significant role in the lives of many former slaves. The women quoted recall the joy they felt after

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 37.

reaching salvation and the impact the experience had on their entire adult lives. At the same time, many of the narratives of both men and women emphasize the major role that older women played in interpreting their religious visions. Children turned to their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers in order to understand more fully the meanings of their experiences.

Yet, women also faced the limitations of gender during their visions, since standards at the time forced them to curb their expectations. Women's recollection of their visions indicate that they sought out a higher power to care for and guide them. They did not assume to take a formal role of leadership, but instead wanted a compassionate force to give them an inner strength. In return for their prayers, women believed that they should pray or speak, but not preach to their community. The importance of women's leadership as mentors and prayer leaders will be explored more fully in the subsequent chapters; however, it is important to realize that at all times the expectations set by a patriarchal religion constantly tempered their advancement and reached them in even their most personal religious visions.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **MOTHERHOOD**

Cultural expectations based on gender and set by both African Americans and whites directly influenced the familial experience for slave men and women. Women cooked, cleaned, did laundry, and supervised children; similar to white women, they performed traditional domestic chores. Both sexes contributed to the raising of children; however, the rules of the slave system created a strong bond between women and their children, because a child usually lived with his/her mother and invariably took on her status as slave or free. This relationship coupled with the fact that women held the primary responsibility for child rearing, made women extremely important in both nuclear families and extended families.

The family unit served as one of the most important aspects of African American culture in the nineteenth century South. The family provided a place of refuge where slaves could live as individuals, prioritize their own household tasks, shape their own values, and express true emotions. Yet, the slave family in any form was always vulnerable to external pressures. The institution of slavery undermined the stability of African American families since the law did not recognize slave marriages. Most slave women faced the challenge of raising children under extremely difficult conditions. For example, they married men on distant plantations, constantly faced the threat of rape

from white slaveowners and overseers, and were sold from their families. All of these factors contributed to undermining the strength of the nuclear family.<sup>51</sup>

However, white slave owners had an interest in maintaining these families because they organized slaves and reproduction within the family that served as a reliable source of slave labor. At the same time, they did not want slave women's interests in their own homes to take away from the work they performed for profit. According to Jacqueline Jones: "The black family has been the focus of a struggle between black women and the whites who sought to profit from their labor. . . . Slaveholders callously disregarded black familial relationships in order to advance their own financial interests."<sup>52</sup> Thus, the slave family was open to exploitation at the same time that it served as the primary source of kin group preservation. Within this vulnerable family setting, slave women used their role as mothers to provide a sense of security and continuity.

These important family relationships provided women with influence on setting family standards and providing any semblance of stability. One significant way they demonstrated their family leadership was through religious instruction and guidance. Slave women—mothers, aunts, and grandmothers—served as unofficial advisers and mentors providing security and moral expectations for slave children, as well as elevating women's status in the family realm. There are many fewer references in the narratives to the importance of fathers in providing religious guidance. Even though the references are less frequent, understanding the roles that fathers played provides an important

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<sup>51</sup> Deborah Gray White, "Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum South," in Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History, 2d ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27. This is not to say that slave families were inherently weak. Instead, the argument here is that families in slavery faced serious challenges and that the system imparted a legal relationship between women and children by granting them the same status.

<sup>52</sup> Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery to the Present (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 4.

complement to the understanding of mothers. This chapter focuses on Evangelical women as mothers and aunts; however, it also provides insight into the religious leadership of men within the family.

Through the practice of Evangelical religion or forms of folk religion, women obtained an important place in their families, representing a moral authority in the slave community. In her study of black women during the First Great Awakening, *Come Shouting to Zion*, Sylvia Frey emphasizes, “the critical role played by black women in . . . the dissemination of religious values within and between generations.”<sup>53</sup> Women played a central role in passing on spirituality in many forms, including Evangelical Christianity. And by imparting their knowledge of religion, women’s role in the family became much more significant. Women’s role as unofficial advisers also served a practical need because preachers did not always reside nearby. And many of the white preachers did not have the full confidence of slaves given their close relationships with slaveholders. Therefore, women provided a constant source of religious instruction and inspiration. Evidence of the powerful influence women’s religious faith played in the lives of their children, as well as in enhancing women’s self-esteem appears throughout the WPA and Fisk narratives.

In order to offer this role of leadership in religion, women first had to have religious experiences and confidence of their own. The previous chapter’s discussion of conversion provided examples of how religious belief provided some increased confidence and self-awareness. In many of the former slaves’ narratives, the women remember the personal significance that religion played in their adult lives. These memories take on exceptional significance because Evangelical religions emphasize personal experience.

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<sup>53</sup> Sylvia R. Frey, and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. xii.



One former slave from Tennessee described a vision in which she was baptized; she recalled Jesus saying to her: "Go and be of good cheer for I will encamp round and round about you like a mighty wall and many shall hear thee and believe. Amen." She further recalled that "when He finished speaking I came to myself and it looked like I just wanted to kiss the very ground. I had never felt such a love before."<sup>54</sup> She stated clearly that the feelings Christianity bestowed upon her made her feel loved and gave her the strength to educate others about her religion.

Frankie Goole expressed happiness about her belief in God and her positive memories of religion during slavery: "I b'long ter de Baptist Chuch. De culored peoples useter hab camp meetin's, en dey'd last fer two weeks. Lawd hab mercy did we hab a time at dem meetin's, preachin', singin', en shoutin' ....Sum ob dem would shout 'til dere throats would be sore."<sup>55</sup> The strength of her emotional reaction mirrored her pride in belonging to the Baptist church and its community.

Alice Sewell, a former slave from Missouri described the meaning of private prayer:

We used to slip off in de woods in de old slave days on Sunday evening way down in de swamps to sing and pray to our own liking. We prayed for dis day of freedom. We come from four and five miles away to pray together to God dat if we don't live to see it, do please let our chillun live to see a better day and be free, so dat dey can give honest and fair service to de Lord and all mankind everywhere.<sup>56</sup>

Alice Sewell and other slave women used prayer to express their desire to provide a better existence for their children, and in turn received solace from these prayers.

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<sup>54</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 15, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, Vol. 11, (Missouri Narratives), 305-06.

A very real indication of the importance of mothers' influence on their children's religion is the number of references in the former slaves' narratives recalling their mothers' praying, singing, discussing religion, or attending meetings. These memories directly reflect the impact of women's religious activities on their children. They also indirectly indicate that women gathered strength, introspection, and comfort from praying. Their own convictions led to a position of religious leadership within families, an ascent that directly challenged white assumptions of black inferiority. The more women secretly gathered to discuss religion, prayed while working, and taught their children about worship, the more subversive religious expression became. At the same time, this type of religious resistance to the institution of slavery became a means for women to gain respect and to give strength to their children.

A former slave remembered that watching her mother praying instilled in her the desire to become a Christian: "The Lord first spoke to me when I was twelve years old. I used to see my mother pray and I wondered what it meant. I began to pray."<sup>57</sup> Sylvia Watkins, a former slave from Tennessee, recalled similar feelings when she said, "I member hearin' mah mammy pray 'Oh Father op'n up de do'ers en sho us lite.'"<sup>58</sup> Watkins only knew her mother for a few years, but she distinctly remembered her mother's Christian beliefs and that her mother used to pray secretly by turning down a pot.

My mother was a good Christian woman and shouted all the time. I prayed to God from the time I was a little girl just like she told me. She died when I was young and not more than thirteen or fourteen years old. I was by her side when the Lord took her away.

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<sup>57</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 16, (Tennessee Narratives), 77.

Watkins then recalled her sorrow at her mother's death: "After she died I was awfully lonesome and prayed more than ever. Not very far from our house were some hay stacks and my mother had told me to steal off there to pray."<sup>59</sup> The need for secrecy indicates that her mother recognized the subversive nature of religious worship and instilled that in her daughter.

Many of the narratives depict mothers' influence on their children with the description of prayers as being overtly connected with women's desire for their families to be free. One former slave's only specific memories of his mother pertain to religion. He stated:

I can just barely remember my mother. . . . But I do remember how she used to take us children and kneel down in front of the fireplace and pray. She'd pray that the time would come when everybody could worship the Lord under their own vine and fig tree – all of them free. It's come to me lots of times since. There she was a'praying, and on other plantations women was a'praying. All over the country the same prayer was being prayed. Guess the Lord done heard the prayer and answered it.<sup>60</sup>

W.L. Bost described his mother's prayers as related to freedom from slavery. His mother clearly viewed religious expression as a means to gain power. Bost stated, "My mother she sing an' pray to the Lord to deliver us out o' slavery."<sup>61</sup> Another former slave recalled: "Us colored folks had prayer grounds. My Mammy's was a ole twisted thick rooted . . . bush. She'd go in dar and pray for deliverance of de slaves."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 47.

<sup>60</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 10, (Arkansas Narratives), 64.

<sup>61</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 14, 143.

<sup>62</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 16, (Tennessee Narratives), 49.

Private prayer, like singing, played a significant part in the daily working lives of most slave women. Rose Adway said that her mother used to sing religious hymns while spinning and carding thread.<sup>63</sup> Another former slave held similar memories:

My mother was a Baptist and I often used to see her sit alone knitting and singing. She would often get happy and shout. When she died I was only about ten years old I used to hear her say, "I am so glad I am free." I did not know then what she was talking about. I thought she meant freedom from slavery. I went to church and tried to get a religion because I wanted to shout like Mama.<sup>64</sup>

The example her mother provided directly led her to embrace the Evangelicalism that she carried into her adult life.

Another factor evident in many of the narratives is the dialogue that took place between mothers and their children. Evangelical teachings encouraged women to provide domestic and moral authority in their families. Many of the people interviewed remember that as children they witnessed their mother praying. They also recalled asking their mother about the meaning and value of her actions. This form of mentoring introduced children to the personal esteem and power of religious faith during the uncertain times of the antebellum era.

Former slave Austin Pen Parnell knew both his father and mother very well; however, his mother was the one who helped introduce him to Evangelicalism.

I can remember how my mother used to pray out in the field. We'd be picking cotton. She would go off out there in the ditch a little ways. It wouldn't be far, and I would listen to her. She would say to me: "Pray son," and I would say, "Mother, I don't know how to pray," and she would say, "Well, just say Lord have mercy." That gave me religious inclinations. I cultivated religion from that time on. I would try to pray

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<sup>63</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 8, (part 1), 18.

<sup>64</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 60.

and finally I learned. One day I was out in the field and it was pouring down rain, and I was standing up with tears in my eyes trying to pray as she taught me to.

The influence of Parnell's mother's religious practices continued after she died: "I was just walking out. My mother was dead. I would be walking out and whenever I would get the notion I would stop right there and go to praying."<sup>65</sup>

Mothers recognized that they needed to impart the serious nature of their children's situation at an early age. In Ellen Cragin's narrative, she described her mother as a good Christian and as a strong disciplinarian. "My mother was a great shouter. . . . My mother was a great Christian woman. She raised us right. If you didn't bring it in at sundown, she'd whip you—whip you with an inch of your life."<sup>66</sup> Cragin connected her mother's moral authority as a Christian with her role of providing discipline to the family. Her mother gained respect as an Evangelical with strong beliefs, thus her daughter admired her mother's role as a moral leader.

Mothers realized that they could teach their children that Evangelical religion was important to gaining the personal strength to survive the oppressive system:

[In prayer meetings] they called on God out of heavy hearts. I was small but I witnessed all these things. My mother always took us little ones along because she was afraid something might happen to us. Coming up in this I didn't have much more room in my life for mischief and frolicking. Life was a serious matter and I had the seed sown in my heart while it was tender. So by the time I was sold I had about made up my mind what I was going to do. I couldn't get away from it and even now, at times, it seems like I can hear my mother's voice ring through my soul as it did back in the dark days.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 10, (part 5), 270.

<sup>66</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 8, (part 2), 42.

<sup>67</sup> Rawick, *God Struck Me Dead*, 156.

The influence of his mother's words remained with him after being sold from his family and provided him with the courage to persevere through the most difficult of times.

Slaves also incorporated voodoo and other folk religions into their spiritual beliefs. Many of these traditions overlapped Christianity in African American slave culture. Donald G. Mathews describes this complex relationship: "Black religion in the Old South was a churning suspension of ideas and behavior patterns fed by African and Christian traditions." He continues: "the richness of early black religion may in part inhere in its openness to two separate strains from the past which became fused into a profound restatement of the Christian dialectic between the burdens which enslave humanity and the hope of freedom." The presence of what many referred to as superstition served a valuable spiritual expression for the slave community; spirits less awe-inspiring than God and similar enough to humanity allowed the existence of communication between the two worlds.<sup>68</sup>

Some slaves completely rejected their past beliefs at conversion to Evangelicalism, but for the most part blurred spiritual boundaries existed. As with Christianity, mothers served an important function in informing their children of these folk beliefs, as well as by helping them to understand their meaning. One former slave, Patsy Hyde, recollected: "In slavery time peoples b'leeved in dreams. I members one nite I dreamed dat a big white thing wuz on de gatepost wid a haid. I tole mah mammy en she said, 'Gawd wuz warning us.'"<sup>69</sup> Her mother evidently believed in the Christian faith; however, her interpretation of the dream combined both belief systems.

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<sup>68</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 208, 209.

<sup>69</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 15, 34.

The boundaries between the dead and the living were not always sharply defined in slave folk culture. Many slaves described seeing ghosts and spirits. Jane Arrington described her exposure to these traditions:

My grandmother on my mother's side told me a lot of stories 'bout haints and how people run from 'em. De told me 'bout slaves dat had been killed by dere marster's coming back and worryin' 'em. Ole Missus Penny Williams, before Jackson May bought mother, treated some of de slaves mighty bad. She died an' den come back an' nearly scared de slaves to death. Grandmother told all we chillum she seed her an' knowed her after she been dead an' come back.<sup>70</sup>

Aunt Adeline, a former slave from Kentucky described her mother's powers as a fortune teller: "My mother seemed to have a gift of telling fortunes. She had a brass ring about the size of a dollar with a handwoven knotted string that she used. I remember that she told many of the young people in the neighborhood many strange things. They would come to her with their premonitions."<sup>71</sup>

Emily Camster Green recalled her aunt seeing visions at a dance:

She wuz a spiritualis' woman—you knows whut a spiritualis is, don' you? Well, everybody wuz dancin' an' habbin' a good time—Aunt Mary say, "Hush I's gonna ask is Ole Massa gonna git well." Den she say—"If Ole Massa gonna die, rap three times." Den in a minnit comes a loud blam! blam! blam! right across de house. Den we all cry an' go home cause we knows Ole Massa's gonna die!<sup>72</sup>

By referring to her aunt as a spiritualist, the narrator depicted her aunt as someone who could cross between the worlds of Evangelical Christianity and folk religion. In Emily Green's description, there was not a clear distinction between these two belief systems.

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<sup>70</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 14, 46.

<sup>71</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 8, (part 1), 15.

<sup>72</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 11, (Missouri Narratives), 140.

Aunt Harriet Mason recalled a time when her daughter needed the assistance of a folk doctor to help her recover from an accident:

One time before my daughter Della got to wearing it [a silver dime on a string], she was going down the road, not far from our house, when all at once her leg gave way and she could not walk. Of course I knowed what it was. So I went after Linda Woods, the witch doctor. She rubbed her leg with it and told me to get all the life everlasting (a weed you know) that I could carry in my arm, and brew it for tea to bathe her leg.

Aunt Harriet's daughter did not follow the instructions, and then she called for the doctor again: "She came with the striped bottle and destroyed the witch spell again, telling her that if she went over the road again for nine days . . . she would remain a cripple all her life."<sup>73</sup> Even though she did not follow the directions initially, calling back the witch doctor demonstrates a level of belief.

These accounts of women's role in folk religion coupled with mothers' influence on disseminating information pertaining to Christianity are not to claim that parents as a team or individual fathers did not have a significant influence on children's religious practices. Many examples surfaced in the narratives emphasizing that both mothers and fathers worked jointly to inform their children of Christianity or discussed religious matters together. Charlie Richardson stated that he "wake up lots of times and hear my Ma and Pappy praying for freedom. They do that many times."<sup>74</sup> Another former slave described his father's influence on his early religious education:

My father started me off to praying. Every Wednesday night when he came to see us, as soon as it was time for us to go to bed he always called me to him and made me kneel down between his knees and say my prayers. He was a powerful man and my mother rejoiced in him so. She

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<sup>73</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 16, (Kentucky Narratives), 35.

<sup>74</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 11, (Missouri Narratives), 295.



wouldn't do anything without first asking him. It was so joyful to see them together.<sup>75</sup>

These former slaves benefited from a secure family life and both of their parents clearly contributed to their religious education.

Other narratives, such as one by Claiborne Moss, focused solely on the father: "We had church twice a month. The Union Church was three miles away from us. My father and I would go when they had a meeting. Bethlehem Church was five miles away."<sup>76</sup> Incretia Alexander's father played a significant role in her religious education:

My father would have church in dwelling houses and they had to whisper. My mother was dead and I would go with him. Sometimes they would have church at his house. That would be when they would want a real meetin' with some real preachin'. It would have to be durin' the week nights. You couldn't tell the difference between Baptists and Methodists then. They was all Christians.<sup>77</sup>

Her father played a prominent role in the private prayer meetings of the slave community. His leadership role instilled a strong faith in her and a loving respect of her father.

Zenie Cauley's father was a Baptist preacher both before and after the war. She stated, "I member when they carried us to church under bresh arbors. Old folks had rags on their hair. Yes'm I been there." She claimed that both whites and blacks listened to her father preach. She also recalled, "I was bout a mile from where I was born when I professed religion. My daddy taught us the right way. I tell you, in them days you couldn't join the church unless you had changed."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 148.

<sup>76</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 10, (part 5), 161.

<sup>77</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 8, (part 1), 35.

<sup>78</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 8, (part 2), 3-4.

References to the importance of fathers as religious figures occur throughout both the WPA and Fisk University narratives. For example, many conjure doctors and voodoo experts in the slave community were men. However, the predominant figures mentioned in relation to Evangelical Christianity are mothers and other females from throughout the slave community. The importance of the women's relationships with children contributed to women's religious leadership and moral authority. As aunts and mothers provided children with comfort and confidence in a system that was designed to subjugate their humanity, this leadership role of women continued to increase. Mothers' functions as advisers, mentors and guides contributed to their standing in the family and transcended into a leadership role throughout the entire slave community.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE PLANTATION MISTRESS

The slave community had a rich religious tradition, often referred to as the “invisible institution” that existed outside of the realms of white influence.<sup>79</sup> Also evident is that women played a major part in that tradition, and in turn they gained inner confidence, as well as both family and public leadership. However, a significant visible religious institution also existed in the South, in which whites and blacks worshipped together on plantations and within Southern Evangelical churches.<sup>80</sup> White and African American women played an important role in these biracial churches. According to Randy Sparks: “Women’s response was so great that they composed a majority in Evangelical churches.”<sup>81</sup>

Mistresses played a central role in the biracial worship on plantations. Many slave narratives, especially those of women, recall the significant impact that white women had on both slaves’ religious instruction and daily worship. In his study of slave religion, Albert J. Raboteau stated: “In the fervor of religious worship, master and slave, white and black, could be found sharing a common event, professing a common faith and experiencing a common ecstasy.”<sup>82</sup> Some of these influences were positive as depicted in

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<sup>79</sup> Raboteau, Slave Religion, 212-88.

<sup>80</sup> Frey, Come Shouting to Zion, xiii.

<sup>81</sup> Sparks, On Jordan’s Stormy Banks, 44.

<sup>82</sup> Raboteau, Slave Religion, 314.

the narratives, while many were negative. Yet throughout both the WPA and Fisk University narratives it is evident that relationships between the white mistress and slave men and women were an essential part of the Evangelical religious experience.

Furthermore, white women and slave women had similar responsibilities under Evangelical Christianity. Both white women and slave women aspired to the ideology of motherhood and moral authority. Donald G. Mathews argued that; "The nurturing function of women within the family came to take on ideological significance as Evangelical white southern women became the ultimate model of Christian discipleship." As mentioned earlier in regards to slave mothers, white women had an ideal standard of motherhood that they aspired to, and with that came moral authority. Many white mistresses who professed Evangelicalism used this as a justification for addressing their slaves as part of an extended religious family. Mathews continues: "Evangelical Southern women . . . established their peculiar and most important act of benevolence by becoming tribunes, teachers, and missionaries to slaves."<sup>83</sup>

Most women attempted to make their religious beliefs the standard for their families and for the community at large. They prayed publicly, attempted to provide examples of good works, and participated in benevolent actions. White women attempted to extend these ideologies to their slaves for a variety of reasons. Similar to the mission to slaves proposed by Evangelical leaders, white women's religious instruction attempted to control slaves by encouraging them to live a good Christian life. Many slave men and women attempted to live by standards of the larger, dominant white culture. Some slaves believed in the teachings of Evangelical religion and believed that these domestic values were inherent in being a good Christian.

Yet, white women provided religious instruction to many of their slaves for reasons other than cultural domination, such as a belief in spreading the Evangelical word

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<sup>83</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 111-12, 116.

to as many converts as possible. The unique relationship between African Americans and white women, functioning within a patriarchal religious order, is evident in many of the narratives, especially those pertaining to plantation prayer meetings. Together, those with minimal power in Southern society were able to forge their own identities through their Evangelical faith.

Many examples of white mistresses' mentoring influence exist throughout the narratives. Specifically, they helped to instruct slaves in the teachings of the Bible, since slaves generally did not have the ability to read or even access to Bibles. One male former slave recalled:

All de training an' advice I evah had came from mah mistress. She wuz a beautiful Christian; if I am anybody, I owe it to her. I nevah went to school a day in mah life; whut I know I absorbed frum de white folks: Mah religion is De Golden Rule. It will take any man to heaben who follows its teachings.<sup>84</sup>

From his mistress, this former slave learned the basics of Evangelicalism and the importance of following Christian rules to have a devout life.

Martha Grant's mistress also instructed slaves in the doctrine of Christianity; "We'd go up to the white folks house every Sunday evenin' and old mistress would learn us our catechism. We'd have to comb our heads and clean up and go up every Sunday evenin'. She'd line us up and learn us our catechism."<sup>85</sup> Narcissus Young, a former slave from Kentucky remembered the first prayer he learned: "Mah missis l'arned me ter pray, 'Now I lay me down ter sleep. I pray de Lawd mah soul ter keep, but if I should die 'fore I wake, I pray de Lawd mah soul ter tek.' I jined de Primitive Baptist Chuch w'ile young

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<sup>84</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 8, (part 2), 70.

<sup>85</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 9, (part 3), 71.

en b'en dere ebe'y since."<sup>86</sup> His mistress provided him with his first introduction to formal religious expression.

Plantation mistresses often took part in informal prayer meetings. During these religious sessions, a missionary preacher would provide a sermon and the plantation mistress would pray and teach catechisms. If a preacher was not available, one of the male slaves would preach. One woman described such a meeting:

My owner was a good woman and we got along a little better than most slaves. She taught my uncle to preach and most of the time she attended the meetings. My mother was a great shouter after she got converted and Miss X. used to always hold her. Sometimes she would almost shout. My uncle couldn't read so Miss X. just read off a little scripture to him and he would stand up and preach away for an hour or more.<sup>87</sup>

This quote provides another example indicating the commonalities that could exist between white women and slave women through Christianity, even within the confining structure of the institution of slavery. In addition, the mistress's reading scripture to the slave preacher demonstrates a willingness to share in Evangelical worship, while still retaining control over the contents of the sermon.

Furthermore, the former slave witnessed his white owner's compassion for his mother during a prayer meeting:

I will never forget the day I saw my mother fall out and rise again shouting and praising God. . . . Everybody was shouting and crying. My mistress took her handkerchief and wiped my mother's eyes and nose. At the close of preaching, Uncle called on Mamma to pray and she sent up a petition that moved every heart.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 16, (Tennessee Narratives), 80.

<sup>87</sup> Rawick, *God Struck Me Dead*, 146.

<sup>88</sup> Rawick, *God Struck Me Dead*, 148-49.

His experience highlights the most positive of interaction between white and black women, and indicates the importance of this moment.

Liza Jones, a house worker and cook during slavery, described her interactions with her white mistress:

Old mistress was a good old Christian woman. All the darkies had to come to her room to prayermeetin' every night. She didn't skip no nights. And her help didn't mind workin'. They'd go the length for her, Miss. . . . When I was little I sho set on old mistress' dress tail. I used to go to church with her. She'd say, "Open your mouf and sing" and I'd just holler and sing. I can member now how loud I used to holler.<sup>89</sup>

Jones' mistress encouraged her to express herself freely when worshipping. This is significant because many whites did not approve of the emotionalism that slaves displayed during prayer services.

Malindy Maxwell's narrative described her owner's violence toward his wife, Miss Sarah. Maxwell felt great empathy for her mistress, especially because she faced the same violence that threatened all slave women. She said that her mistress' husband "beat her, his wife, like he beat a [slave] woman." Not only identifying with the violence her mistress faced, Maxwell also recalled that her mistress provided them with religious mentoring: "Miss Sarah say, 'Come get your rations early Saturday morning, clean up your house, wash and iron, and we'll go to preaching tomorrow—Sunday.'" She continued "Miss Sarah was a Primitive Baptist and that is what I am till this day. Some folks call us Hardshell Baptist. The colored folks set in the back of the church. The women all set on one side and the men on the other."<sup>90</sup>

White women often intertwined their roles of religious leader and disciplinarian when interacting with their slaves. Henrietta McCullers remembered her mistress:

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<sup>89</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 9, (part 4), 156.

<sup>90</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 10, (part 5), 57-58.

“She’d let us have a co’n shuckin’ onc[e] a year, and of course, we had a heap of prayer meetin’s an’ a few socials. She ain’t wanted her [slaves] ter dance case [because] she am such a good Christian.”<sup>91</sup> Tom Wilcox also remembered his owner as providing a moral authority: “My missus wuz a religious woman an’ I can’t tell yo’ de number uv times she has beat me cuss I done some kind uv wuck on a Sunday. We went ter church ever Sunday an’ we wusn’t lowed ter cuss an’ sich things.”<sup>92</sup> This power as disciplinarian meant that white women and slave women would never be equals, even in Evangelicalism, which provided an egalitarian ideology in its rhetoric.

White women’s mission to encourage religious faith in their slaves did not mean that their behavior toward them was kind and benevolent. The relationship between white women and both black men and women varied throughout the South. White men in the patriarchal South had the ultimate power over the rest of society; however, white women benefited directly from their protection. Obviously, white women did not have the power—or for many, the desire—to free their slaves; thus there was a major discrepancy in the power of white women and African Americans.

Even though the relationship between white women and African American slaves was complex, underlying it there was much antipathy between the women who often worked closely together performing household chores and religious duties. For example, Sarah Douglas described an incident in which her mistress whipped her and she responded with prayer:

Sometimes she tied our hands around a tree and tie our neck to the tree with our face to the tree and they would get behind us with that cow hide whip with a piece of lead tied to the end and Lord have mercy! child, I shouted when I wasn’t happy. All I could say was, “Oh pray, mistress, pray.” That was our way to say Lord have mercy. The last whipping old miss give me she tied me to a tree and oh my Lord! old miss whipped me

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<sup>91</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, 73.

<sup>92</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, 377.



that day. That was the worse whipping I ever got in my life. I cried and bucked and hollered until I couldn't. I give up for dead and she wouldn't stop. I stop crying and said to her, "Old miss if I were you and you were me I wouldn't beat you this way." That struck old miss's heart and she let me go.

Douglas did recall attending the white church with her mistress and master; however, she stated bluntly, "We served our mistress and master in slavery time and not God."<sup>93</sup>

Douglas's narrative recognizes that even though there were some positive interactions between white and slave women based upon Evangelicalism, the bottom line was that the divide between slave and owner went much deeper.

White women and slaves also interacted through worship in biracial churches. Randy J. Sparks' study of Mississippi Evangelicalism focuses on interracial worship: "In the biracial churches the Evangelicals established, there occurred a remarkable and significant process of cultural exchange between blacks and whites." According to Sparks: "The typical church was a biracial one; the African-American influence on Evangelical ritual and practice was significant and left an indelible imprint on southern religion."<sup>94</sup> Even though the churches were biracial, most divided seating by race or offered separate sermons for African Americans. However, there was a message that many slaves gained from this biracial worship—they belonged to the same religion as their master and mistress, and this inherently indicated that they were religious equals.

Within this biracial experience, white women played an important role. As in the more informal prayer meetings on plantations, white women compelled their slaves to join them in worship at local churches. Throughout the narratives, former slaves remarked on their mistress' encouragement for them to attend church. Others would comment about white women allowing them to attend church, but not necessarily with

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<sup>93</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 8, (part 2), 189-90.

<sup>94</sup> Sparks, On Jordan's Stormy Banks, 2, 3.

much enthusiasm. Either way, there was a constant negotiation between the white women and slaves, in particular slave women, in regards to formal religious worship.

For example, Ellen Briggs Thompson attended a white church: "Sometimes the slaves would go to the white people's church. They wouldn't go often, just every once in awhile. White ladies would get after the colored to come and go with them sometimes."<sup>95</sup> Aunt Belle Robinson attended church with her mistress: "My 'Mistus' always took me to the Baptist Church with her."<sup>96</sup> Ann Mathews received permission to attend services: "Our missis let us go ter church. I 'long ter de church ob Christ."<sup>97</sup> A female ex-slave recalled in her narrative that the white mistress at her plantation: "Mrs. Baker would take anyone in de wagon to church dat wanted to go. My aunt went to church but would not be baptized."<sup>98</sup> All of these women remember attending church with their mistress, indicating that on some level the women shared a religious experience.

Robert Lofton recalled that his mother had more autonomy than most slaves: "My mother used to take me and go out and stay a day or so. She would arrange with mistress and master and go down Saturday and she would take me along and leave her other children with this other woman." Lofton's mother also attended church:

Sometimes my mother went to the white church. . . . When we went to the white folks' church, we took and sat down in the back and behaved ourselves and that was all there was to it. When they'd have these here big meetings—revivals or protracted meetings, they call them—she'd go to the white and black. They wouldn't have them all at the same time and everybody would have a chance to go to all of them.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 10, (part 6), 313.

<sup>96</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 16, (Kansas Narratives), 21.

<sup>97</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 16, (Tennessee Narratives), 43.

<sup>98</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 11, (Missouri Narratives), 171.

<sup>99</sup> Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 9, (part 4), 270, 271.

Another slave recalled: "Our white folks when they have camp meeting would have all the colored come up and sing over the mourners."<sup>100</sup>

Harriet McFarlin Payne had memories of attending church on her slaveholders' plantation, in which her mistress played an active role:

Miss Sallie was the best mistress anybody ever had. She was a Christian. I can hear her praying yet! She wouldn't let one of her slaves hit a tap on Sunday. They must rest and go to church. They had preaching at the cabin of some one of the slaves and in the Summertime sometimes they had it out in the shade under the trees. Yes, and the slaves on each plantation had their own church.<sup>101</sup>

Payne recalled that her mistress limited their work on Sundays so that they could attend church. This demonstrates that the influence of white women could be a positive one because they allowed slaves an opportunity to rest and to worship publicly.

One woman recalled feeling uncomfortable because she expressed her spirituality, and only the preacher defended her:

[A] white woman took me to church one day with her baby, and I liked to tore them white folks church up shouting. The preacher said, 'Let her shout, she is a Christian and got religion.' But they never did carry me back no more. They left me home with the baby after that.<sup>102</sup>

A distinction existed between the emotionalism displayed by African Americans and whites more restrained behavior in biracial churches. This shows that even though a religious commonality existed between white women and slave women, their cultural differences could be too remote to find much similarity.

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<sup>100</sup> Rawick, Unwritten History of Slavery, 282.

<sup>101</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 10, (part 5), 300-01.

<sup>102</sup> Rawick, Unwritten History of Slavery, 136.

Some former slaves recalled attending church in order to serve their mistress' needs. Wylie Neal, who was raised with the mistress' children, frequently went to church to perform chores:

Mrs. Neal always took some of her colored people to church to attend to the stock, tie the horses and hitch up, maybe feed and to nurse her little girls at church. The colored folks sat on the back seats over in a corner together. If they didn't behave or talked out they got a whipping or didn't go no more. "They kept the colored people scared to be bad."<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, Cora Armstrong recalled, "Old Miss would carry me to church sometimes when it was hot so we could fan for her."<sup>104</sup> Although some white women encouraged African Americans to go to service, their motives could also be blatantly self-serving.

The relationship between white women and slaves, and more specifically the relationship between slave women and white women, was a complex one. White mistresses belonged to the socially and economically dominant class and thus their situation could never be equal to that of their black female slaves. At the same time, however, they did share similar experiences and expectations as women who believed in the Evangelical faith. They both had to impart a moral influence on their families and extended families. For black women, this meant caring for not only their own families, but also an extended kin. For many white women, Evangelical Christianity transformed their position as slaveowners into one of moral responsibility for the entire slave community. This social influence of white women encouraged in Evangelical religions may even have contributed to slave women's ability to achieve roles of leadership in their families, because white women believed that slave women were acting in accordance within the dominant culture's concept of domesticity.

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<sup>103</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 10, (part 5), 182.

<sup>104</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 8, (part 1), 75.

The narratives indicate that for many women born into slavery, mistresses played key roles in that permeated many aspects of their religious life. In some instances these relationships were purely a form of white domination. Yet in some cases they transcended the master-slave relationships into briefly shared moments of communal believers in as evangelicals. Both white women and slave women experienced subordination by men in the patriarchal South and worshiping in a church led by male elites, contributed to a tenuously shared female identity. African American and white women worked together performing domestic chores, attended biracial churches, and shared legitimate religious faith; these women's lives were linked.

## CHAPTER 4

### POWER IN PRAYER MEETINGS

African American slaves believed not only in the importance of immediate family, but also in the significance of an extended definition of kin; thus women's role in the family reached beyond the borders of the traditional nuclear family. Africans carried these traditions to the new world, and the significance of the community as an extension of the family increased as the institution of slavery continued to undermine the stability of nuclear families. Slaves were continually placed in difficult situations in which they had to rely upon each other extending beyond blood ties. Thus, studying the role of women in religion as mothers in family units must be complemented by understanding the significance of women serving as mentors throughout the entire community.

One of the most valuable of these extended kin relationships for African Americans was that of aunt.<sup>105</sup> According to Jean E. Friedman, "Black women and men accepted non-kin as family and in so doing reinforced individual identity and expanded their sense of community—community separate and distinct from that of whites."<sup>106</sup> These traditions meshed well with the Evangelical custom of referring to converts as family members, such as sister and brother. Women served as mentors for children

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<sup>105</sup> The term of aunt was used to apply to women relatives in the traditional sense, and in addition it was used for adult women in general as a term of respectful address. The term here is used to connote both traditional kinship and an expanded definition of family as an extending to all members of the slave community.

<sup>106</sup> Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden*, 86-87.

throughout the community whether or not they were related by blood. References in the narratives indicate that this considerable position gave women influence in the community both from their help in child rearing and more specifically from their contributions to spreading religious beliefs.

Aunts and mothers were all part of a network of slave women that helped to provide stability and support for the entire slave community. One of the significant contributions of these Christian slave women was playing an active role in the formation of secret prayer meetings. Slaves would “steal away” or “turn the pot down” in secret meetings and to keep their activities quiet. These prayer meetings constituted an important aspect of African American Christianity. Usually on plantations, either slaves were not allowed to worship or they were only supposed to worship with whites on Sundays. Prayer meetings would occur in private, either in slave quarters or in secret meeting places away from the supervision of white people. Often meetings happened in brush arbors or “hush harbors” which were private, secluded areas that slaves designated for worship.

Many white slaveholders feared the threat of insurrection posed by the influence of Christianity; they recognized that egalitarian messages infiltrated the Evangelical sermons. For those reasons, they wanted to maintain control over their slaves’ worship. Prayer meetings allowed African American slaves an opportunity to express their true religious beliefs, including their hope for a better future either on earth or in heaven. These private prayer meetings represented the core of a developed African American Evangelical Christianity that would emerge after the end of the Civil War as part of independent black churches.<sup>107</sup>

One woman recalled the religious instruction she received from her aunt, since her parents died at a very young age: “I lived with my aunt and she taught me to pray to

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<sup>107</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212-19.

God. . . . My aunt used to tell us that Jesus would be a father and a mother to us so I and my sister said we would seek to get a religion.”<sup>108</sup> A former slave and midwife after the war, Isabelle, recalled going to the Methodist church with her aunt on Sundays: “Aunt Cindy got ‘happy’ at the services and began to throw herself about and shout.”<sup>109</sup> The image of her aunt expressing her faith stayed with her through her entire life.

Minsky Walker recalled that at a very young age he would attend meetings with his mother, and that she introduced him to both his aunt by blood and other women from the community:

Dey didn’t get to talk in de evening ’cause de white folks preached for us then. We was called to-gether in de brush arbor by a big bell dey rung. . . . I well remember after meetings mammy would stop and talk with women and she said, “Minsky, dis is your aunt, my sister. You can walk along home with her.” She would meet other women and dey would start talking about de meetin’. First thing I would know dey would be jumpin’ up and dancin’ and pattin’ their hands until all de grass wore off slick.

He was young to remember much else from the times of slavery; however, he did grow up to become a preacher who traveled and represented no particular denomination. He said that he just wanted to spread the words of God. Throughout his narrative, he referred to the significance of religion in his life and the women who first introduced him to Evangelicalism.<sup>110</sup>

The presence of these prayer meetings is noted throughout the narratives. One woman said that she had heard her mother pray many times, because slaves “in them days turned the pot up and prayed and sung in the pot to keep the white folks from hearing ’em.”<sup>111</sup> Another woman recalled that on their plantation they did not have to turn the pot

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<sup>108</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 55.

<sup>109</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 11, (Missouri Narratives), 204.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 365-66.

<sup>111</sup> Rawick, Unwritten History of Slavery, 282.



down to protect them while having a prayer meeting. She did state that they “had wooden shutters and they would just pull those shutters to and do the door some way, and pray and sing in the room together.” She also remembered that young children would “get in the woods and have meetings and sing them (spirituals), but we wouldn’t sing them to the white folks.”<sup>112</sup>

W. L. Bost described the impact these meetings had on him as a young man whose only opportunity for religious veneration was in private meetings:

[We] never have chance to go to Sunday School and church. The white folks feared for [us] to get any religion and education, but I reckon somethin’ inside jes told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter. We would sneak off and have prayer meetin’. Sometimes the paddyrollers<sup>113</sup> catch us and beat us good but that didn’t keep us from tryin’.<sup>114</sup>

The prayer meetings served as such an important part of slaves’ religious experience that they were willing to risk physical harm in order to worship.

One slave recalled the common feelings that both Evangelical Christianity and the secret prayer meetings imbued in slaves:

Meetings back there meant more than they do now. Then everybody’s heart was in tune and when they called on God they made heaven ring. It was more than just Sunday meeting and then no more Godliness for a week. They would steal off to the fields and in the thickets and there, with heads together around a kettle to deaden the sound, they called on God out of heavy hearts.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 12, 16.

<sup>113</sup> The paddyrollers or slave patrollers were established to prevent slaves from stealing, running away, plotting insurrections, or being away from home without a pass giving them permission. Slaves tried to find ways to avoid the patrollers who often were violent. See Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 617-19.

<sup>114</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 14, 143.

<sup>115</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 156.

As this narrator described, the group meetings presented a meaningful way for slaves to gather, to express their sorrow, and to pray for a better future.

Women, who had developed a strong leadership position as mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, naturally gained a leadership role in these community gatherings. Slaves gained strength from gathering together to pray, sing, and shout. In these religious meetings, many women accepted visible positions, as in all areas of African American spiritual life. They brought their children, led prayers, and expressed emotions freely in these settings. Yet, as mentioned in the Introduction, their leadership remained informal because the narrators never described these women as preachers.

As one former slave described in his narrative, women's influence in the prayer meetings was instrumental to his desire to convert to Evangelicalism:

I don't know why I wanted to learn so bad unless it was because my mother prayed and cried over us so much. The old folks used to slip out in the fields and thickets to have prayer meetings and my mother always took me along for fear something would happen to me if left behind. They would all get around a kettle on their hands and knees and sing and pray and shout and cry. My mother was a great prayer and shouter and she always asked God to take care of her son—meaning me. I would look and listen; sometimes I would cry. I didn't know what I was crying for but the moaning and singing was so stirring that I couldn't help it. But now as I look back I know that these things sunk deep in my heart.<sup>116</sup>

The intensity of the meetings instilled in him a strong sense of the importance of religious faith throughout his life.

One woman's narrative stated: "Aunt Phoebe did (have prayer meetings). She would turn the kettle down and just sing and pray, and sometimes she would be happy and just moan."<sup>117</sup> Another woman remembered being one of the women to gather other slaves for meetings. She recalled: "We used to have little singing and praying like good

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 147-148.

<sup>117</sup> Rawick, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 118.

ole time revival; and we would take pots and put them right in the middle of the floor to keep the sound in the room.”<sup>118</sup> Again, she emphasized the importance of their secrecy as well as the outright emotional joy they gained from joining together and praying.

Women also were visible at more formal religious gatherings. Lula Chambers described a scene that made her realize the importance of religious faith: “I never will forget, I saw a real old darkey woman slave down on her knees praying to God for his help. She had a Bible in front of her. Course she couldn’t read it, but she did know what it was, and she was prayin’ out of her very heart.”<sup>119</sup>

A male preacher and former slave provided the most moving testimony of the influence of women on teaching him religion:

I will never forget the day I saw my mother fall out and rise again shouting and praising God. I will never forget some of the meetings in the fields and thickets where the old folks got together in the quiet hours of the night and lifted their voices to glory . . . My mother always took us little ones along.<sup>120</sup>

Alice Sewell recalled that their white preacher, “never did tell us nothing but be good servants. . . . Den dey baptize you and call dat, you got religion. Never did say nothing ’bout a slave dying and going to heaven.” An older woman in the community, however, influenced Sewell’s beliefs by performing ceremonies, such as funerals: “De old lady dat raised my mother, she was a black mammy. She done all de burying of de [slaves], said de funeral sayings by herself. She knew it by heart.”<sup>121</sup> This showed the influence a woman could have in the community by leading prayers and funerals.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>119</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 11, (Missouri Narratives), 80.

<sup>120</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 148, 156.

<sup>121</sup> Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 11, (Missouri Narratives), 303.

These examples demonstrate that women created a very important sphere of influence within the slave community. They led prayers and organized the informal meetings that formed the core of slave's Evangelical worship. Furthermore, these meetings had broad political implications because their worship messages undermined slaveowners' power. This informal influence in the slave religious community increased women's power in their community as well as their perceptions of their own worth in the community.

On many plantations more public displays of worship occurred to complement the private prayer meetings. Ceremonies were held for slaves with either a white or African American preacher. Others were meetings initiated by the plantation master or mistress. Furthermore, some slaves felt free to gather and worship on their own time without having to sneak away to brush harbors. These worship meetings, like the secret prayer gatherings, allowed women to gain a more visible presence in the religious community.

Women had influence not only in private prayer meetings, but also in the more public services. "Public prayer was another gift frequently employed by women. These long, emotionally charged prayers often had as much impact as a sermon."<sup>122</sup> They often prayed and demonstrated their religious devotion in very visible and emotional ways. According to one former slave's narrative, his mother, as well as other women in the community, played a major role introducing him to religion and nurturing his faith. He described their role in formal ceremonies attended by the slaveholders.

All of my people were great Christians. Shouting, singing, praying and good old heartfelt religion make up the things that filled their lives. My grandmother was named Eve. She was a Christian from head to foot. It didn't take much to get her started and when she called on God she made

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<sup>122</sup> Randy J. Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Evangelicalism in Mississippi 1773 – 1876* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 45. As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, there remains a distinct difference between prayer/shouting and preaching a sermon because the preacher's power, whether informal or ordained, extended to only a few women during this time period.

heaven ring. There was Aunt Bellow, a heavy brown-skinned woman. She was a great shouter. Aunt Charlotte who used to cry most all the time when she got happy. Aunt Kate was a tall portly woman and a shouter. Any time Uncle Link or any other preacher touched along the path she travelled, she would jump and holler.

He continued, "After he finished preaching my mother prayed and Lord! it looked like the very heaven would come down. My mother could send up the most powerful prayer of anybody on that plantation or in that part of the country."<sup>123</sup> All of these women publicly prayed and shouted – they constituted a very visible force in the plantation's religious community experience.

As demonstrated thus far, women and men did not experience an equal oppression under slavery. Even though the very foundation of slavery removed economic or property control within the slave community and made the gendered experience of whites and African Americans distinct. Each had access to religious and cultural influence in different ways. Claims by some historians that African American males did not have the power to impose their domination upon women, do not fully consider the role of religion and patriarchy within the slave community. The relationship between men and women in the slave community is more complex. Under the system of slavery, African traditions combined with Evangelicalism to form an African American religious and cultural outlook that gave power to women in some circumstances and imposed gender limitations of patriarchy in others.<sup>124</sup>

In addition, patriarchal order infiltrated slave religious culture and placed some limitations on the perception of women's influence. For example, the public meetings adhered to the parameters set by the Evangelical churches because a preacher formally led them. Furthermore, a clear line did not exist between the spiritual and the secular in

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<sup>123</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 154-55.

<sup>124</sup> Paul E. Johnson, ed., African-American Christianity: Essays in History Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 90.

African cultures, which is a tradition that survived as part of African American society.<sup>125</sup> This blurring of secular and religious beliefs both positively and negatively affected the attainment and perception of African American women's power. Women's religious power transcended into perceived leadership within the entire slave community. At the same time, however, the dominance of male power structures, which did not allow women to become preachers, placed some limitations on their community positions.

One of the most striking of these limitations placed on women's power was their exclusion from becoming preachers, even within the informal slave religious community. This was discussed in the first chapter in regards to visions, and was also true in the Evangelical religious structure. During the early to mid-nineteenth century, women rarely reached the status of preacher in white Christianity and this was also true for black Christianity. Slave women and men both had restricted access to education and religious instruction; however, Evangelicalism did not require an educated clergy. Almost all slaves were illiterate. For this reason, neither males nor females had an advantage in learning the contents of the Bible. Men alone, however, claimed the position of preacher regardless of their training or proficiency.

According to one former slave, "My grandfather was a preacher and didn't know A from B. He could preach. I had a uncle and he was a preacher and didn't know A from B."<sup>126</sup> Another slave confessed his lack of education, yet he claimed that in a vision God said to him, "I am wisdom and possess all knowledge. I ordain you to preach. Wisdom in the heart is unlike wisdom in the mind."<sup>127</sup> Clearly literacy did not serve as a requirement for being a preacher, only gender. Some former slaves criticized the skill of preachers

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<sup>125</sup> Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 30.

<sup>126</sup> Rawick, Unwritten History of Slavery, 46.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

after the end of slavery, as in one narrative: “Since I have learned ’xactly what preaching is, I realizes, you know, that they really couldn’t preach, but it were good enough in them days, I reckon, he, he.”<sup>128</sup> This indicates that even with only partial attention to a preacher’s adeptness, men alone claimed the right to this position.

The overall language used by former slaves in the narratives only depicted men as preachers. A male former slave recalled that “Uncle Link got up in the stand. . . . As he warmed up the spirit struck him and, let me tell you, they set that place on fire that day. After he finished preaching my mother prayed and Lord! It looked like the very heaven would come down.”<sup>129</sup> While acknowledging the success of his mother’s words in front of the gathering, he did not consider her expression as that of a preacher. Another man listed the names of some male African American preachers: “Old Brother Bill Perkins, Peter Stynes, Uncle Tom Bell – he was the leading preacher.”<sup>130</sup> He clearly remembered the preachers and discussed the important status they achieved.

A woman’s narrative described Sunday meetings, stating: “Colored men would go round and preach like they do right now.”<sup>131</sup> She did not even mention women as possibly serving in this role. Even within Evangelicalism’s seemingly egalitarian leanings, some slaves became either official or unofficial preachers; all of these slaves were men. The patriarchal leanings of Christianity, and of Southern society both white and black, were not eliminated within the Evangelical antebellum tradition. Established black churches at the time strictly enforced the rule that only males had the right to reach the position of preacher.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>129</sup> Rawick, God Struck Me Dead, 155.

<sup>130</sup> Rawick, Unwritten History of Slavery, 261.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 203.

In the final analysis, Evangelical Christianity provided an outlet for slaves to worship and pray for a better future. As indicated in the narratives, Evangelical Christianity provided a means for women to express themselves wholeheartedly and in public—at a time when not many women spoke before groups. Although the religion was ingrained with patriarchy it was certainly more egalitarian than most religious and cultural institutions during the antebellum period. As Randy J. Sparks stated in *On Jordan's Stormy Banks*: “Evangelicals often attacked the traditional hierarchical structure of their society, but the weapon they chose—the doctrine of Christian equality—was in one sense a double-edged sword, for while it struck effectively at hierarchy, it implicitly undercut patriarchy.”<sup>132</sup> As a result, slave women certainly benefited from the openness of Evangelical Christianity, even though this openness was limited. They gained both self-esteem and the esteem of the community, as well as earned the right publicly to pray and express their religious leadership.

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<sup>132</sup> Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks*, 41.



## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Evangelical Christianity had developed into a sweeping social force that introduced social changes throughout the South. Methodists and Baptists whose initial message supported the downtrodden and the illiterate, became a dominant force shaping cultural expectations. Along with this power, came the need to conform to the standards of a slaveholding society. A movement that initially had anti-slavery tendencies developed a more conservative edge. Many ministers and their white congregations rationalized the existence of slavery through the Bible. Yet they also wanted to increase slaveholders' benevolence and provide a new outlook for the South in regards to the institution of slavery. In an attempt to convert new members and make peace with local slaveholders, Evangelical ministers created a mission to convert large number of slaves. This mission also eased the minds of some clergy who felt a moral responsibility to the slaves themselves. Clergymen traveled throughout the rural South preaching sermons, and they also encouraged plantation masters and mistresses to provide religious instruction to their slaves.

This widespread attempt to convert slaves to Evangelical Christianity was successful. Some conversions were part of official church record, but the majority was part of a religious community that developed within the slave population. And even though some slaveholders adhered to the mission, most did little if anything to encourage religious faith. Many slaves flocked to religion because it offered a chance to express

hope for a better future and to receive comfort in such an insecure world. And since slaves understood the revolutionary aspects of the Bible, they adapted a form of religious worship that mirrored the standards of the early Evangelicals. They exhibited a more emotional expressionism and followed an oral tradition. This religion offered the opportunity to become part of a larger community of believers in which the humanity of slaves was welcomed, and appreciated by many.

Within this antebellum religious culture women developed their own niche. Both white and black women found in Evangelicalism an openness to their influence as moral leaders. In most congregations women outnumbered men. Because Evangelical religions emphasized the importance of the family, and even referred to other Evangelicals in terms of kin relationships, women's role as mothers was valuable. Women had the ability to help shape their families into good Christians and good citizens. They led family prayers, encouraged children to lead religious lives, and became prayer leaders in the churches. Women also gained valuable psychological benefits from belonging to Evangelical churches. Their self-esteem increased, since they took on a more significant role in both the family and in the church. Their domestic influence transcended into a religious leadership position.

White women and black women shared these possible advantages, yet the unique position of black slave women in this time period has not received enough attention. For instance, African American slave women had limited ability to provide a stable home for their families. They did not have control of their own time, thus they could not attend church or help with church activities, as easily as they may have wished. But the importance of religious expression was the core for many slave women's existence. Women's Evangelical beliefs allowed them to provide hope and a valued system of belief for their children, as well as for themselves.

Slave women formed their own ideal of domesticity, a balance between the white culture's standards and their own African traditions. And in this they formed a valuable niche in which they realized many meaningful psychological benefits. As slave women converted to Evangelicalism, their influence gained a spiritual value. This was important because it in turn meant that slave women took on religious leadership roles both in their families and in the extended slave community. Slave women developed other means of expressing religious faith. They served as mentors to their families, led private prayer meetings, and prayed publicly at both plantation and church worship. Through such leadership, women provided hope and comfort to their people. As mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and sisters, women formed a constant source of religious influence in the slave community.

In studying the significant part African American women played in their society, it is also essential to discuss their interactions with white plantation mistresses. The relationship between white women and slaves became increasingly important, because white women often provided religious instruction to the slave community. In some cases there is strong evidence that white women adopted a motherly view toward their slaves, by extendeding their religious and domestic duties to the entire slave population. However, in other cases, white women used their slaves as they did in all other instances. They brought slave men and women to church to hear a mundane message—obey your master, do not steal, tend your children, and perform other forms of personal service for whites.

In the end, African American slaves forged a religious expression truly representative of their existence. Donald G. Mathews describes the development of an African American religious approach: "They found in Christian commitment and communal identity shelter from the slave system, an institutional framework to confound the logic of their social condition, an ideology of self-esteem and an earnest of

deliverance and ultimate victory.”<sup>133</sup> Women played a unique and indispensable part of that faith tradition. Slave women served as mentors and prayer leaders, and fostered deep-rooted family and religious ways of life. They used religion to find positive ways to face the harshness of the oppressive slave system.

The WPA and Fisk University narratives provide an effective source since they focus on the specific memories of former slaves; they present many of the major issues that remained significant to the people until the time of their interview. One of the most common themes in the narratives is Christianity, particularly the visible responsibility for it undertaken by slave women. In the narratives, former slaves consistently recalled the impact of women on their faith. Women remembered converting to Christianity and the love and confidence they felt from that belief system. Men and women often recalled the impact of seeing their mothers praying or witnessing or one of their aunts worship in a private meeting. These recollections gathered almost seventy years after the end of slavery indicate the very important role that slave women played.

Although the patriarchal ideology inherent in Evangelical Christianity did not allow slave women to become preachers, slave women found unofficial means to express their power. The importance of mothers, including caring for extended family members, in both the Evangelical and the African American community, contributed greatly to the empowerment of women as religious leaders. Spiritually, slave women gained a sense of a protection from their faith in God and an opportunity for freedom whether in this life or in the next. And in turn, they passed this message to their children and other young people in the extended slave family. African American used Evangelical Christianity to

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<sup>133</sup> Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 208.

find the inner strength to help the entire slave community, by supplying comfort and providing hope for actual and spiritual freedom.

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