

May-2008

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Recommended Citation

Harrell, Willie J. Jr. (2008). A Call to Political and Social Activism: The Jeremiadic Discourse of Maria Miller Stewart, 1831-1833. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 300-319.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss3/17>

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A Call to Political and Social Activism: The Jeremiadic Discourse of Maria Miller Stewart, 1831-1833

By Willie J. Harrell, Jr.¹

Abstract

This essay identifies the rhetorical strategies of Maria Miller Stewart's Boston anti-slavery discourse as jeremiads that connected her religious, moral, political and social lamentations of the American democratic system and called her audiences to aid in the desensitizing of slavery and America prejudice. When she attempted to establish a common ground, the aim of Stewart's jeremiads was to make her audiences conscious of the numerous social and political grievances within the African-American community. Stewart's jeremiadic discourse called for the deterioration of American racism and sexism and provided an agency that constituted a form of resistance.

Keywords: African-American Jeremiad, American Jeremiad, Anti-Colonization Jeremiad, Black Women Jeremiah, Ethiopianist Rhetoric

Introduction

Why sit ye here and die? If we say we will go to a foreign land, the famine and the pestilence are there, and there we shall die. If we sit here, we shall die. Come let us plead our cause before the whites: if they save us alive, we shall live -- and if they kill us, we shall but die...unless with united hearts and souls you make some mighty efforts to raise your sons and daughters from the horrible state of servitude and degradation in which they are placed. (Maria Miller Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," 1832)

Anticipation surely filled the atmosphere as the attendees assembled at Boston's Franklin Hall No. 16, Friday, 21 September 1832 to discuss their anti-slavery concerns. Located on "Franklin Street," Franklin Hall was the "site of regular monthly meetings of the New England Anti-Slavery Society" (Richardson 45). Included in the roster of speakers was one of the first recognized African-American² women to deliver a public address. The lecturer, a native of Hartford, Connecticut who moved to Boston in the

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² Throughout this article, the terms African-American and Black are used interchangeably.

1820s, knew that her radical discourse would be ill supported by American society and by some of her Bostonian associates. “I hope my friends,” she previously revealed in October 1831, would “not scrutinize” her message “with too severe an eye” (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 28). At the onset of her Franklin Hall homily, however, the novice revealed that two years prior to delivering her speech she experienced an “encounter with divinity” (Bassard 3), which she felt had called her to come forth and articulate the “miserable existence” of her brethren to Boston audiences. The “spiritual interrogation” which she encountered posited: ““Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?”” Her heart compassionately replied: ““If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!”” Possessing, then, nothing but “moral capability—no teachings” but those of the “Holy Spirit,” she answered the call to political and social activism. That evening at Franklin Hall, the speaker condemned America’s so-called “democratic principles” that deprived Black women of education and prohibited their occupational advancement. Emotionally, she revealed to the audience the “condition” her sisters suffered in the North was “but little better than” that of “southern slavery.” She announced White America had “long and so loudly proclaimed the theme of equal rights and privileges, that our souls have caught the flame also, ragged as we are” (“Franklin Hall” 45, 47). When she sermonized from the Boston’s platform of abolitionism, Maria Miller Stewart³ delivered her opines to both Black and White Bostonians during her short-lived career as a New England anti-slavery lecturer. Active in the sphere of Black Boston’s social reformation from 1831 until 1833, her moralizing employed the rhetoric of the African-American jeremiad, a discourse that has undergone significant social, political, and intellectual changes since its initial conception and has demonstrated by its architects an astounding literary authority, one that the rhetoric itself mirrored and shaped.⁴

³ After her marriage on 10 August 1826 to James W. Stewart, Maria Miller “adopted at her husband’s request his middle initial, ‘W.,’” as apart of her surname. Sometimes, however, James Stewart was “called Stewart by mistake.” She records her name as “Mrs. Maria W. Stewart [sic]” on her 1831 *Religion and the Sure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on which We Must Build*. In the “Introduction” to her pamphlet, Stewart records her husbands name as “James W. Stewart.” Her name was also spelled “Stuart” in an advertisement that announced her farewell speech. She signs the speech as “MARIA S. STEWART.” See Marilyn Richardson’s *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 4, 28-29, 65, 74, 122.

⁴ Albeit it brief, Ampadu discusses Stewart’s employment of the African-American Jeremiad in her essay “Maria W. Stewart and the Rhetoric of Black Preaching: Perspective on Womanism and Black Nationalism,” in *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Burlington: U of Vermont P, 2007), pp. 38-54. Also, in the same volume, see Utley’s discussion in “A Woman Made of Words: The Rhetorical Invention of Maria W. Stewart,” pp. 55-71. Others who have discussed Stewart’s rhetoric in terms of feminist thought include Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Susan Roberson, “Maria Stewart and the Rhetoric of Mobility.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies*. 4.3 (2003), pp. 56-61; and Dianne Bartlow, “Maria W. Stewart

This essay investigates Stewart's Boston anti-slavery rhetoric to uncover the jeremiadic discourse that lies beneath. It identifies Stewart's rhetoric as jeremiads that linked religious, moral, political and social lamentations of the American democratic system and called her audiences to aid in the desensitizing of slavery and America prejudice. Supplementing the work of recent examinations of Stewart's rhetoric, (Richardson, 1987, 2007; Roberson, 2003; Ampadu, 2007; Utley, 2007; Bartlow, 2007), this investigation picks up where they left off and argues that Stewart's jeremiadic rhetoric called for the decline of American racism and sexism by arguing that "prejudice would gradually diminish" ("Franklin Hall" 46) while at the same time holds out hope that blacks in America would rise above the dehumanization of slavery and racial prejudice. The African-American jeremiad, a rhetorical device which surfaced from a perceived oppression and degradation of every echelon of Black social, political, economic and cultural life, played a vital role in the development of anti-slavery rhetoric of Boston's African-American community. Stewart's aspirations to achieve equal status for African Americans as citizens of a purportedly democratic America intermittently ebb through her jeremiads.

Historical Significance of the African-American Jeremiadic Discourse: Stewart and the Maturity of Black Women Jeremiahs

Jeremiads are defined as treatises that reflect the perpetual tribulations of an oppressed people and hold out hope for a brighter future in times of crisis. Every group, nation or culture that has met the hands of oppression, imperialism, or colonialism—in whatever form, shape, or fashion—has devised a way to contextualize their hardships and reveal to the public their calamities in a method to achieve social change; entrenched within the walls their polemics is a jeremiadic discourse. The American jeremiad, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, "was an ancient formulaic refrain, a ritual form imported to Massachusetts in 1630 from the Old World...The American jeremiad owes its uniqueness to this vision and mode of rhetoric" (*The American Jeremiad* 6). Bercovitch's analysis suggested that while the jeremiad foretold devastation, at the same time, it was optimistic concerning future events.

Today if we consider the jeremiad a lamentation, it would become more than just prophecy and warnings; it would manifest in many forms of social protest and would become what Bercovitch conceptualized as a "political sermon—what might be called the state-of-the-state-covenant address" (4) that would summon its audience to acknowledge rather than question the basis of their present tribulations. When African Americans acclimatized this "formulaic refrain," their discourse became a form of communication that sought to adjust one's outlook and became "rhetorical in the sense of shifting meaning or adding emphasis to an idea" (Garner and Calloway-Thomas 49). The result is what Wilson Jeremiah Moses identified as the "Black Jeremiad," which he recognized as the formulaic "warnings issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery" (*Black Messiahs* 30-31). David Howard-Pitney concluded that the rhetoric of the American jeremiad ultimately developed into something

as a Forerunner of Black Feminist Thought," *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Burlington: U of Vermont P, 2007), pp. 72-88.

distinctively “Afro-American” because of its call for social prophecy and criticism. He suggested that the rhetoric set out to warn White America of the “declension from the promise of a Christian America” (*The Afro-American Jeremiad* 12).⁵ It is important, then, to discuss the growth and development patterns of the jeremiad as a means of achieving civil liberties and equality for its constituents when delivered by prominent Black Women Jeremiahs of nineteenth-century America. The rhetoric of the jeremiad can aptly be applied, then, to Stewart’s discourse of dissent as she blatantly attacked the moral fabric and affects of slavery and racism in America, making her America’s preeminent Black Woman Jeremiah.

Historically, the preeminent discourse African Americans employed against slavery and its racial prejudice in America, the discourse that aided in defining their social movements, was that of jeremiadic rhetoric. The word “rhetoric,” however, has been used to explore a wide variety of meanings. Some scholars have identified it as a vehicle of uplift, an instrument of language. On the other hand, some had described it as an art of deception (Ampadu, “Maria W. Stewart,” 39). In this investigation, Stewart’s jeremiadic rhetoric was engaged with organizing the experience of racial prejudice and communicating that understanding to her audience. When she violated the boundaries of womanism in nineteenth-century America, for example, Stewart illustrated that at the very nucleus of racial prejudice of American slavery was a domineering and tyrannical structure that impeded every stratum of Black life. Opposition to slavery and its racial prejudice was an ongoing struggle. When Stewart joined that struggle, she advanced the social protest rhetoric of the jeremiad against slavery and its racial prejudices in many ways: a demand for improved education opportunities, women’s right and civil liberties. It was not until the onset of the 1830s, however, that Black Women Jeremiahs like Stewart were able to amass a footing in the anti-slavery regime. This was partly because although women had a place in society, it was not in the midst of affairs that were dominated by men abolitionist.

The continuation of racism and sexism collectively, while it endangered all Black women in general, did not silence Black Women Jeremiahs entirely. In fact, it only helped to fuel their need to further the quest of social reformation in America and strengthen their commitment to ending American prejudice based on race, sex, and gender. During the “short period” of her “Christian warfare,” (“Farewell Address” 71) Stewart advanced onto Boston’s platform of abolitionism and received hostilities from

⁵ In his revised and expanded edition of *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in American* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), David Howard-Pitney defines that American jeremiad as “a rhetoric of indignation expressing deep dissatisfaction and challenging the notion to reform” (*The African American Jeremiad*, p. xii, 2005). Howard-Pitney recently expanded his work to include an updated section on Jesse Jackson, and a new section on Alan Keyes. In doing so, Howard-Pitney renamed his text *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*. This is evidence that African-American jeremiads have an unwavering effect on the American political system as they “still protest injustice” (*The African American Jeremiad*, p. vii). In this more “inclusive” revised edition, Howard-Pitney added a continuous examination of “the thought and rhetoric of a major Black Nationalist,” Malcolm X (*The African American Jeremiad*, p. xii).

her “promiscuous audiences” (Sterling 154), meaning groups comprised of both men and women (Ryan 376). A significant challenge Stewart faced, however, was how to rise above the difficulty of, first, preserving the right to speak in public and, second, question the foundations of racial and sexual discrimination and the injustices that did not follow with America’s democratic rights, without compromising her sense of solidarity with her community. When she provided a significant voice to Black Boston’s resistance against the injustices of racial oppression, Stewart’s career as a Black Woman Jeremiah was significant enough in laying the rhetorical influence for future Black Women Jeremiahs. Stewart was determined to demonstrate that she was a virtuous woman of “high moral character” (O’Connor, 137). Orphaned at the age of five, Stewart was born in 1803 and sent to live with a minister and his family, where she was a servant until the age of 15. While living in the minister’s home, however, Stewart did not have access to education. At the age of 20, she began attending a Sabbath School where she would receive formal education in literacy and religious instruction. These early teachings and religious trainings gravely affected the development of her jeremiadic discourse. Education, she felt, was a means in which the downtrodden could rise above the injustices of racial and sexual discrimination. Contrary to the prejudices and sexism that plagued blacks in the early Republic, Stewart declared that all African Americans deserved the opportunity to attain an education. The function of Stewart’s jeremiads, she lamented in her first “track addressed to the people of color,” was to stimulate them “to exertion” and to impress upon their psyches the “great necessity of turning” their “attention to knowledge and improvement” (*Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality* 28). The only purpose for raising her voice of dissent, she revealed, was because she had “discovered that religion is held in low repute among” some African Americans (“Afric-American” 50).

As many of her opinions showed immense evangelical aptitude, Stewart soon became known as an audacious and revolutionary Black Woman Jeremiah. Mindful that she was disregarding the norm that forbade women speaking in the public sphere, Stewart’s jeremiads called African Americans to develop resilient, self-sufficient educational and economic institutions within their communities, including businesses, schools, and churches: “Possess the spirit of independence,” she beseeched them. “The Americans do, and why should not you? Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted. Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason that you cannot attain them” (38). When she voiced the rhetoric of resistance, Stewart was defiant toward the forces that silenced the voices of women and African-Americans and the traditional hegemonic practices of White America; therefore, she demonstrated resistance when plagued by the ills of racism and prejudice. Yet, in order to envision an America where equality existed for all, Stewart had not only to undercut the dominant notions of race but also to overturn the dominant sexist prejudices that existed at the time. Her jeremiads frequently argued, then, that Black women had an exceptional accountability for instilling intellectual consciousness in the minds of their children: “O ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you! You have souls committed to your charge, and God will require a strict account of you” (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 38). When she sowed the seeds of self-determination for Black men and women, Stewart illustrated that women were the moral leaders (Waters, 376). Men, she believed, also have great

responsibility in this process. While Stewart's jeremiadic rhetoric condemned, and at the same time showed support of the Black man's dilemma of asserting manhood while dealing with the affects of slavery, she also advocated Black self-determination and racial uplift. She lamented "our young men—smart, active, and energetic, with souls filled with ambitious fire" had no one from which to admire or gain self-respect because the older generation was oblivious and downtrodden, due to the influence of "prejudice, ignorance and poverty" ("Franklin Hall" 49). As she forced her audience to reflectively analyze themselves and consider the rationale for their lowliness, Stewart's jeremiad became even more critical of her "brethren" when she asked if they have "made a powerful effort" as the Britons had done when they first arrived to gain the power and control they welded over their servants. "Have you," she beseeched them:

Prayed the Legislature for mercy's sake to grant you all the rights and privileges of free citizens, that your daughters may rise to that degree of respectability which true merit deserves, and your sons above the servile situations which most of them fill? ("Franklin Hall" 49)

Stewart's choice to engender a jeremiad in this fashion was clearly a calculated one. Instead of attacking the hegemonic structure that placed her "brethren" in their socio-political and economic conditions, Stewart sought to uplift "ye sons of Africa" when she vehemently criticized the essence of their manhood and condemned them for not following the fundamental Christian values of "thrift, sobriety, and hard work" (Yee 115): "Most of our color have been taught to stand in free of white man from their earliest infancy," she argued, "to work as soon as they could walk, and to call 'master' before they scarce could lisp the name of *mother*" [her emphasis]. Their status would never change, she lamented, unless they let their resources be "appropriated for schools and seminaries of learning for our children and youth." While she reprimanded Black men for not making themselves men of distinction, Stewart could not comprehend why Black elevation and empowerment was such a difficult task. Had Black men joined and assiduously turned their attention to "mental and moral improvement," she believed, there would be no need for audacious Black Women Jeremiahs like her ("Franklin Hall" 49).

The Development of Stewart's Anti-Colonization Jeremiad

Stewart tenaciously disagreed with separatist schemes such as colonization. Her opposition toward proposals for colonization stemmed to some extent from her disdain for colonizationists' schemes and the methods they employed. During the 1820 and 30s, The American Colonization Society (ACS), an organization established in 1816 that founded Liberia in 1823, a colony on the coast of West Africa, grew and established economic stability. By the late 1820s, however, African Americans believed colonization was as threatening to their prosperity as slavery and prejudice. When ACS received mixtures of "diverse interests," most ACS supporters were certain that the growing number of free blacks threatened the new, budding Republic; they believed that blacks would "corrupt American society with their alleged immorality and their reputed inability

to cope with freedom” (*BAP, Vol. III* 3, 5). Many blacks believed that the ACS was a racist society, while others pointed to its compassionate origins and believed men with visions of an American empire in Africa would later control it.

Because of her dislike for immigration schemes, Stewart’s Anti-Colonization Jeremiad developed and lamented the ills of the Colonization Movement, which proposed to send free blacks to Africa and to emancipate those who would agree to go. As a Black Woman Jeremiah, Stewart was the forerunner in the impassioned Anti-Colonization discourse. From the inauguration of her vocation amidst Boston’s abolitionist movement, Stewart used her jeremiads to vehemently dispute colonization and urged African Americans to remain in America and demand the elimination of racial prejudice. She implored them to use their economic resources to appropriate “schools and seminaries of learning for our children and youth” (“African Masonic Hall” 60). Stewart filled the role of Jeremiah of her people when she further exhorted them to hold steadfast with the American covenant with its promise of social redemption: “African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided and heart-felt interest (“African Masonic Hall” 63-64). Stewart took the time to convey how whites initially drove Native Americans from their homeland and procured blacks from Africa to oppress them in America. Now, she argued, whites sought to send blacks back to Africa (“African Masonic Hall,” 63). Stewart saw colonization as defeat against the power of collective progress. She expected decency to avail. Colonization, therefore, was unjust conduct in her eyes. In her lecture concerning “AFRICAN RIGHTS AND LIBERTY” delivered at Boston’s Masonic Hall No. 28 on 27 February 1833, Stewart lamented:

The unfriendly whites first drove the native American from his much loved home. Then they stole our fathers from their peaceful and quiet dwellings, and brought them hither, and made bond-men and bond-women of them and their little ones; they have obliged our brethren to labor, kept them in utter ignorance, nourished them in vice, and raised them in degradation; and now that we have enriched their soil, and filled their coffers, they say that we are not capable of becoming like white men, and that we never can rise to respectability in this country. They would drive us to a strange land. (“African Masonic Hall” 63-64)

When activists adopt discourse of social protest, they do so for one of two reasons: they are inclined to follow the established format through a combination of interpretation and obligation or they may follow the form intentionally. In her Anti-Colonization Jeremiad, Stewart employed the latter. In the above passage, Stewart infused her homily with nationalistic discourse that was influenced by David Walker, who wrote the extremely controversial, fiery piece on race relations titled *Appeal in Four Articles, Together With a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly to those of the United States of America*. The pages of Walker’s *Appeal* were laced with jeremiadic and nationalistic discourse. Walker, the “militant abolitionist journalist” (Howard-Pitney 13), was one of America’s most prolific activists who inquired: “Have

[whites] not to make their appearance before the tribunal of Heaven, to answer for the deeds done in the body, as well as we? Have we any other Master by Jesus Christ alone?" (*Appeal* 16). Walker's jeremiads sought to beseech White Americans to atonement: "O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness that your DESTRUCTION *is at hand*, and will speedily consummated unless you REPENT" (*Appeal* 56) while he lamented the social condition of blacks in America and sought to infuse pride in his African-American audience by giving them hope that social change was inevitable, Walker's *Appeal* was against any plan that sought:

To get those of the coloured people, who are said to be free, away from among those of our brethren whom they unjustly hold in bondage, so that they may be enabled to keep them the more secure in ignorance and wretchedness, to support them and their children, and consequently they would have the more obedient slaves. (*Appeal* 59)

As did Walker's jeremiadic rhetoric in his *Appeal*, Stewart's call through nationalistic discourse surfaced when she called Black women to place themselves in the line of celestial sanction. She beseeched them: "O woman, woman! Upon you I call; for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be any thing more than we have been or not" ("Afric-American" 55). Walker's influence, then, on Stewart's denunciation against colonization was palpable: "God had raised you up a Walker...Though Walker sleeps, yet he lives, and his name shall be had in everlasting remembrance" (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 40).⁶ The "colonizationists," she lamented, asserted that "we were lazy and idle." Stewart painstakingly refuted this with a voice that echoed Black Nationalism: "We feel a common desire," she bemoaned, "to rise above the condition of servants and drudges" ("Franklin Hall" 46, 47).

Stewart launched her Anti-Colonization Jeremiad at America's hypocrisy when she continued to attack the "colonizationists," who she evaluated as "blind to their own interest." When she argued that colonization is a farcical design, Stewart proclaimed: if "the nations of the earth make war with America, they [the "colonizationists"] would find their forces much weakened by our absence." If the "colonizationists are the real friends of Africa," she lamented, "let them expend the money which they collect in erecting a college to educate her injured sons in this land of gospel, light, and liberty." An endeavor of such magnitude would be graciously received by blacks, and convince them of the trustworthiness "of their profession." She believed, however, that whites' hearts were so

⁶ William Lloyd Garrison (December 12, 1805–May 24, 1879) was a prominent American abolitionist, journalist, and social reformer. He is best known as the editor of the radical abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, and as one of the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society. In June 1830, not long after publishing the third edition of his *Appeal*, however, Walker was found dead on the doorstep of his home. Official city records report his cause of death as tuberculosis. Many, however, believe he was poisoned, but there is not enough evidence to confirm this position. Stewart's pamphlet was published on 8 June 1831, fifteen months after his death.

harden towards blacks that “they had rather their money should be sunk in the ocean than to administer it to our relief” (“African Masonic Hall” 61).

Stewart’s Prophetic Jeremiads Emerged from Her Biblical Exegesis

As customary in jeremiadic discourse, the prophecy element surfaced in Stewart’s rhetoric and served as a forewarning to her African-American audience of the righteousness to come. When she sought to convince America of blacks’ greatness, she cautioned blacks that “our own efforts, however feeble” must avail: “Without these efforts,” she bemoaned, “we shall never be a people, nor our descendants after us” (“Afric-American” 53). In jeremiadic discourse taken as a whole, though, the prophetic is at once marginal, yet pervasive. Most prophets, as it were, never really recognize their role as a prophet, therefore, marginalizing their rhetoric. However, often times the prophet’s mission is overt and definite, sometimes so pervasive it becomes visible. The prophet, “accuser and judge,” as James Darsey reminded us, is “called into being when the law has been violated...the prophet announces both the charges and the verdict of God or nature against the transgressors of the law” (*The Prophetic Tradition* 24). Although she declared that God put His words in her mouth, Stewart neither explicitly called herself a prophet nor did she understand why the “Almighty imparted unto” her “power of speaking” (“Farewell Address” 68). As her contact with the Spirit was “dialogical, a give-and-take” circumstance (Bassard 3), Stewart announced that since the call to political and social activism was imparted onto her, she would take on the role of prophet: when she advanced and made herself “a hissing and a reproach among the people,”⁷ (“Franklin Hall” 48) she indeed rationalized that she was doing God’s work. Her spirituality, then, is at the very center of jeremiadic discourse. As Susan Roberson argued, her spiritual interrogations connected God’s call to her “active and vocal engagement in racial and gender equality.” Stewart’s conversations with God aided in shifting political interests of social equality to sacred concerns, and connected “equality and freedom, self-improvement and social uplift... in the secular world” (57). At a crucial moment in her choice to accept the call to political and social activism, Stewart lamented with God’s help society’s disapproval would never discourage her from carrying out her avowed duty. Stewart believed she would “withstand the fiery darts of the devil,” (“Afric-American” 50) thus explicitly making herself the one chosen to deliver God’s message. When she determined that religion was benevolent, that joy and peace existed when one believed, and that she was “commanded to come out from the world and be separate,” Stewart felt that great work lay ahead and impulsively made a vocation of her “faith in Christ” (“Farewell Address” 66, 67).

In her jeremiadic fashion, Stewart’s prophetic discourse also warned the “great and mighty men of America” of her prophecy: when judgment day came, she prophesized, White Americans would “call for the rocks and mountains to fall upon” them and conceal them “from the wrath of the Lamb,” who would be steadfast on the

⁷ The full passage reads of Jeremiah 29: 18: “I will pursue them with the sword, with famine and with pestilence; and I will make them a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse and a horror and a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them.”

throne. Stewart warned the nation of several issues, but united these warnings with a fundamentally hopeful message in which she confirmed her devotion to civil liberties for blacks. When she echoed the rhetoric of the book of Revelation 6:16⁸, for example, she prophesized that many of the “sable-skinned Africans” that White Americans abominate would excel in “the kingdom of heaven as the stars forever and ever.” Stewart placed the main duty of reform on White America, though, whose deeds threaten true democracy. She portrayed blacks, however, as fulfilling their promised duty. For example, Stewart warned White America of the hardships of their consequence of racial oppression and issued a direct threat that if they did not end their ways:

You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever. (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 39-40)

She called her brethren to “stand still and know that the Lord he is God. Vengeance is His,” she sermonized, “and he will repay....America has risen to her meridian.” However, Stewart understood that her Black audience could not idly stand too far away because it would illustrate a sign of ungratefulness toward others who have already articulated their voice amidst the growing abolitionist regime. Stewart cautioned her brethren to get close to each other and see God’s work in progress. Therefore, she urged them to support each other and prophesized: “When you begin to thrive, [America] will begin to fall” (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 40). Stewart attempted to instill in her Black audience that in order for change to occur, they had to believe that they were not intended to fill a second-rate place in society to which they had to adapt themselves.

Stewart’s prophetic voice was also articulated in the midst of the racial and gender turbulence during the turmoil of nineteenth-century America (Roberson 57). Because the influence of prophetic rhetoric normally derived in large measure from its representation as coming from a divine encounter, Stewart’s prophecy further lamented: “O, ye daughters of Africa, Awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves” (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 30, 31). When she prophesized the rising of the “daughters of Africa,” Stewart believed that they would become “fired with the truth of freedom” and “enlightened to distinguish themselves among other people.” Stewart’s discourse is tantamount with the prophetic rhetoric of the jeremiad as it simultaneously called her audience to consciousness about their oppression by implanting a sense of self-importance, which provided a source of inspiration important to the continuance of her jeremiads. “Many will suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed Africa,” she lamented, “and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs” (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 26). Her prophecy envisioned a time when Black oppression would “soon come to an end” (“Franklin Hall” 49). Stewart’s jeremiad looked forward to the day when blacks “hearken unto the voice of the Lord,” and walked in His ways and followed His decree. When this occurred, she believed, eminence,

⁸ “Hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of their wrath is come; and who is able to stand?”

elegance and grace would combine with their virtues (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 29).

Stewart consistently described blacks' lowly temporal status by invoking the suffering servant image that associated unjustified torment and subjugation with redemption. For example, she reminded her audience: "As the prayers and tears of Christians will avail the finally impenitent nothing; neither will the prayers and tears of the friends of humanity avail us anything, unless we possess a spirit of virtuous emulation within our breasts" ("Franklin Hall" 49). Stewart's jeremiadic prophecy stood as unequivocal proof of divine revelation she envisioned. The tenets above are apparent, but it should also be noted how this passage could have served for more than one function: it stood as an detailed declaration of what Stewart determined as the fundamental sequence of the prophetic discourse for blacks, namely a period of marginality on Earth because of the injustices of slavery, followed by a period of "virtuous emulation." Thus, her jeremiads included two phases: first, God would acknowledge Black disenfranchisement and liberate them, and, second, God would punish White America for its injustices. "For in his own time," she warned, "he is able to plead our cause against" the oppressors, and release upon them "the ten plagues of Egypt" (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 39-40).

Laced in biblical exegesis, Stewart's political sermon "An Address Delivered before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America" was immersed with prophetic rhetoric and became the "political sermon" that Bercovitch illustrated (4). She drew from the books of Matthew and Romans to illustrate that God's judgment was His bond. Judgment day, she prophesized, "is coming." When this day would arrived, all the "secrets of all hearts shall be manifested before the saints and angels, men and devils." To the meek followers of Christ, this day would be a day of bliss and exultation; to the charlatans and nonbelievers, however, it would be a day of "terror and dismay." In her prophecy, though, Stewart admitted that "no man...not even the angels of heaven" knew the day and hour of Christ's vehemence. When she reminded her audience of Christ's return, Stewart bemoaned:

Christ shall descend in the clouds of heaven, surrounded by ten thousands of his saints and angels, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him, and before him shall be gathered all nations, and kindred, and tongues and people; and every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess; they also that pierced him shall look upon him, and mourn. Then shall the King separate the righteous from the wicked, as a shepherd divideth the sheep from the goats and shall place the righteous on his right hand, and the wicked upon his left. Then, says Christ, shall be weep and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham and the prophets, sitting in the kingdom of heaven, and ye yourselves thrust out. Then shall the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of their Father as the sun ("Afric-American" 51)

In the above passage, Stewart encoded Romans 14:11 and Matthew 25: 32, 33. The roots of her prophetic vision, then, lie in the very structures of biblical text: like the opening of many prophetic books of the Old Testament, Stewart's message began with her call to

political and social activism: "I have enlisted in the holy warfare, and Jesus is my captain," she cried, "and the Lord's battle I mean to fight, until my voice expire in death." Stewart expected that some would hate and victimize her even unto her death ("Afric-American" 52). This identification allowed Stewart to deliver her jeremiads in radical fashion because she put words in the Maker's mouth: the wicked, or whites would be "thrust out" of heaven, while the moral and virtuous, blacks, would "shine forth in the kingdom." As Marilyn Richardson noted, Stewart delivered God's message to "direct intervention in the affairs of nations and individuals, against the wicked and on behalf of the downtrodden"; God's wrath would only occur would only occur, however, "according to his own time" (16).

At the very nucleus of her prophetic jeremiads, Stewart's identification with God communicated a profound awareness of His presence and activity. As is normal with prophets, in their inspired state, Stewart was closer to the realm of the spirit than her audience. To blacks she illustrated optimism that they would finally receive the earthly rights promised to every man. She reassured them that if they continue to follow Christ, they will be carried by "angels into Abraham's bosom...and the Lord God shall wipe away their tears." When this happened, Stewart exhorted, they would then be "convinced before assembled multitudes, whether they strove to promote the cause of Christ, or whether they sought for gain or applause ("Afric-American" 51). Therefore, Stewart's prophetic jeremiads attempted to stimulate the urgency of "spiritual purification" she envisioned African Americans needed and to proclaim the moment of reckoning against corrupt America (Richardson 16). When she connected blacks' plight with the transcendent beliefs and values of the Bible, Stewart's jeremiadic prophecy sought to establish a nurturing foundation from which progress would develop. She dealt justly and practically with the problems facing African Americans, especially women and offered them boundless optimism in the future.

Stewart's Jeremiadic Prophecy Materialized Masked in Ethiopianist Discourse

Stewart positioned Ethiopianist rhetoric within the walls of her jeremiads. Her employment of Ethiopianism contributed to the legacy of forerunners who had utilized it as a strategy to move African Americans to a consciousness concerning their historical and political unity. In the early Republic, identification with Ethiopian traditions was a recurring thematic concern to Black activists who spoke out against oppression. Known as Ethiopianism, this concept included appreciating Ethiopia's ancient civilization as well as its profound role in the Bible and world history. A common trope in the Black community before the Civil War, (Moses, *The Golden Age* 157) Ethiopianism manifested throughout blacks' jeremiadic rhetoric as a means to identify with the celebrated, virtuous, and perhaps the earliest of all human civilization. Perhaps the first to utilize the phrase was Prince Hall. Hall believed that when "Ethiopia begin to stretch forth her hand," blacks would rise "from a sink of slavery to freedom and equality" ("A Charge" 47). Hall's Ethiopianist rhetoric suggested that people of African extraction would take their rightful place in the Republic's democracy. The phrase was later employed by activist such as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, Abraham D. Shadd, Peter Spencer, and William S. Thomas, and Martin Delany. Their employment of Ethiopianism

corresponded with Keith Gilyard and Anissa Wardi's declarations that Black Jeremiahs in the early Republic saw themselves as the chosen ones among the perceived chosen nation (*African American Literature* 932). Moses suggested that this "Ethiopian tradition," then, stemmed from the Biblical verse "'Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.'" A religious movement among sub-Saharan Africans during the colonial era, Ethiopianism became not just a "trans-Atlantic political movement" when employed by African Americans, "but a literary movement as well." It concerned an ever changing and recurring outlook of history, "the idea that the ascendancy of the white race was only temporary, and that the divine providence of history was working to elevate the African people" (*The Golden Age* 23-24). Stewart's interest in Ethiopianism blossomed in her jeremiadic discourse. As Ampadu suggested, Stewart provoked, yet captivated her audience through her rich use of anaphora, a rhetorical device that used repetition to connect with its audience ("Modeling Orality," 139). Therefore, when Stewart expanded her prophetic discourse and simultaneously augmented the development of Ethiopianism, the phrase appeared throughout her Boston anti-slavery speeches, sermons and essays.

While Stewart aligned her woes with the biblical prophet Jeremiah's, she lamented that her eyes were filled with a "fountain of tears," that she "might weep day and night"⁹ (*Religion and the Pure Principles*, 30). In her prophetic discourse, Stewart sincerely believed: "Ethiopia might stretch forth her hands unto God." The shackles of slavery and ignorance would not rupture, however, until blacks became unified as one and cultivated amongst themselves "the pure principles of piety, morality and virtue" (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 30). Her jeremiad would have been adequate to mobilize blacks to rise up against oppression. At the onset of *Religion and the Pure Principles*, Stewart skillfully attempted to accomplish this through a series of questions in which she sought to further reach her audience. "Where is the parent who is conscious of having faithfully discharged his duty," she asked, "and at the last awful day of account, shall be able to say, here, Lord, is they poor, unworthy servant?" (31).

The second time the phrase appeared in Stewart's jeremiadic discourse is in her essay "Cause for Encouragement." Written as a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the *Liberator*, as response to Garrison's account of the "Second Annual Convention of the People of Color," Stewart urgently sought to call blacks to social action when she lamented "the day-star from on high is beginning to dawn upon us, and Ethiopia will soon stretch forth her hands unto God." Therefore, she believed that the work to "soon" start would rest on the shoulders of blacks. Again surfacing as her prophetic discourse, Stewart utilized the phrase to lament what she saw as divine intervention: "holy religion" would ascend and advance blacks higher than their condition and cause their dreams and ambitions would align with anti-slavery advocates and become the final means of rupturing the "bands of oppression" (43). She exhibited both the hope and prophecy elements of the jeremiad when she lamented:

⁹ The full version of the phrase reads: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (Jeremiah 9:1).

O, America, America! Thou land of my birth! I love and admire thy virtues as much as I abhor and detest thy vices; and I am in hopes that thy stains will soon be wiped away, and thy cruelties forgotten. O, ye southern slaveholders! We will no longer curse you for your wrongs; but we will implore the Almighty to soften your hard hearts towards our brethren, and to send them a speedy deliverance. (43)

Stewart suggested that blacks were the moral beings, since they are the ones that would “implore” God to show decadent White America the way to righteous. She then prophesized that if free African Americans devote their interests more persistently to “moral worth and intellectual improvement,” the result would be palpable: “prejudice would gradually diminish, and the whites would be compelled to say, unloose those fetters” (“Franklin Hall” 49).

When her Ethiopianist rhetoric appeared next in her Boston jeremiadic discourse, Stewart’s anamnesis, a recalling intended to move her audience from the biblical past to the present, reminded her audience “God has said, that Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto him.” God, she sermonized, had different ways to “bring about his purposes.” She further prophesized, unless the rising generation is discerning enough to display a distinctive disposition toward “each other from what we have manifested, the generation following will never be an enlightened people” (“Afric-American” 53). Such reference assisted in an important role of Stewart’s Ethiopianism, which was to fashion amidst the Black community an awareness of unanimity and historical and political strength.

Subsequently, in her “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall,” Stewart’s biblical exegesis played homage to God’s promise to blacks. Stewart’s mythic vision of Ethiopia was an account of its uniqueness, its destiny and its future. In her jeremiads, Ethiopia had been set apart for the noble purpose of universally affording justice to blacks. It was Stewart’s hope that blacks would be able to triumph over all obstacles if they remained steadfast to idea of political, social, and economic freedom. Because “God in wrath remembers mercy,” she lamented, blacks would certainly despair. When Stewart revealed that they sprang from “one of the most learned nations of the whole earth” as the original people, yet remained marginalized in American, her prophesy interpreted “a promise is left us; ‘Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God.’” This time Stewart used the word Ethiopia to symbolize all descendants of Africa as she appealed to each person of African extraction to rise up and cast off the injustices they endured. Stewart’s interpretation and employment of the phrase illustrated her frustration that blacks were denied advancement in the American democratic system and her irritation that racial prejudice was being encouraged in general.

Stewart further lamented that the condition blacks suffered “has been low for hundreds of years.” This would continue to be the case, she argued, “unless by true piety and virtue” blacks endeavored to reclaim that which was originally given to them by the Almighty (58). Stewart’s repeated reference to the phrase “Ethiopia will stretch forth her hands unto God” also illustrated a remarkable attachment of antebellum strivings by blacks toward religious, social and political freedom in New England. Based on her Afrocentric exegesis of biblical text, Stewart’s Ethiopianist rhetoric and imagery also

represented her belief that blacks' dignity and place in divine favor would set the stage for blacks' future in America.

The Alpha and the Omega of Stewart's Boston Jeremiads

In her first Boston jeremiadic tract, *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Pure Foundation on Which We Must Build* (1831), Stewart illustrated elements of jeremiadic discourse when she lamented: "it is not the color of the skin that makes the man or the woman but the principle formed in the soul" (29). She spiked her jeremiads with two overriding principles: she believed blacks had to rely upon themselves for emancipation and civil rights, and that she was an instrument of God, called to represent her brethren in the fight against oppression. "And I believe," Stewart bemoaned, "that the glorious declaration was about to be made applicable to me, that was made to God's ancient covenant people by the prophet" ("Farewell Address" 74). Often times in her jeremiads, Stewart incorporated passages from the Books of Lamentations, Judges, Ester, Genesis, Psalms, Matthew, Isaiah, Revelation, and many others; scripture to her was an evocative instrument. She lamented:

Every man has a right to express his opinion. Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such. He hath formed and fashioned you in his own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect. He hath made you to have dominion over the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, and the fish of the sea. [Genesis 1:26] He hath crowned you with glory and honor; hath made you but a little lower than the angels; [Psalms 8:5] and, according to the Constitution of these United States, he hath made all men free and equal. (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 29)

Unquestionably, the recurrent biblical allusions in her jeremiadic rhetoric substantiated an understanding of the importance of the Bible as an essential model of discourse in the lives of New England blacks in the 1830s. In the above passage, Stewart made use of Genesis and Psalms to assert insurgence in the consciousness of her oppressed brethren. Warning as the message was and imperative as the manifesto from which it was delivered, Stewart lamented that the problem the African-American community faced was that many blacks adhered to the racist philosophy of their inferiority; thus, she sought to insist that they attune their interest toward knowledge and development of the race. Stewart's message chimed with echoes of jeremiadic discourse: her critique of social justice; her mourning for her people; and her optimism for a future where democracy in America was selected on a nationalized basis. Her rhetorical strategies distinguished her from those of her male counterparts, despite the significantly related subject matter. Since male activists sustained the role of Jeremiah within the community, the influence of social gender boundaries placed on African-American women during the early Republic propelled Stewart's adoption of jeremiadic discourse, thus feminizing her voice of elevating society's moral awareness. Stewart's focus on oppressions—especially

racism, sexism, and class oppression—that affected Black women, is what most clearly distinguished her jeremiadic discourse from her male counterparts. The reactions to Stewart’s speeches, however, were devastatingly pejorative. Outright condemned for having the courage to transgress the “hegemonic mechanisms of power through her discourses” (Roberson 59) and speak out in a public setting, Stewart met opposition even from some who supported her; therefore, she chose to leave Boston. She ended her *Religion and the Pure Principles* with a lasting prophetic revelation: “the Lord will raise us up, and enough to aid and befriend us, and we shall begin to flourish” (*Religion and the Pure Principles* 29).

Optimistic to the very end, however, Stewart refused to go quietly and connected her initial and final Bostonian discursive discourses by repeating the phrase “it is not the color of the skin that makes the man or the woman but the principle formed in the soul” from *Religion and the Pure Principles* to get her final point across concerning civil liberties of Black women. This time, however, Stewart’s use of anaphora amended the phrase to include anamnesis of “a young lady of Bologne” who, in the thirteenth-century obtained the Doctor of Laws degree and launched public redress “to expound the Institutions of Justinian.”¹⁰ Thus, Stewart suggested that when women activists rose to tackle issues of important to their communities, they possessed celestial authority, and her message materialized that the power the “young lady of Bologne” possessed was that of persuasiveness and expression. When Stewart immortalized the “young lady of Bologne,” she initiated a feminist tradition long before the women’s movement was ever launched (Ampadu, “Maria W. Stewart,” 41). While she emphasized the sex of her audience as well their solidarity to the abolitionist movement, Stewart further imagined what would happen if such a woman appeared among “our sable race?” In her feminist prophecy, she responded: “Brilliant wit will shine come from whence it will; and genius and talent will not hide the brightness of its luster” (“Mrs. Stewart’s Farewell Address” 70). Stewart’s jeremiad here became a feminist vehicle to empower Black women to a consciousness about how they are perceived in society. When she spoke for Black women, Stewart called upon them to establish their “individual and communal identity, their moral and political liberty.” She achieved this when she articulated and acted out the terms of nineteenth-century Black feminism (Roberson 57), which constituted possessing a feminist consciousness that dissected subjugation and worked to purge that oppression. Stewart extended the normative accepted roles and restrictions of female social action, thus adding a feminist perspective to the emerging African-American jeremiadic discourse, a feat her male counterparts did not have the ability to achieve.

Stewart believed her individual attempt to make herself helpful among blacks in Boston, that her calls to Black Bostonians had “accomplished little” (Yee 115). She, then, delivered her farewell jeremiad Saturday, 21 September 1833 to a crowd audience in a

¹⁰ Roman emperor Justinian is known for his reorganization of the government of the Roman Empire and his codification of the laws, the *Codex Justinianus* (“Institutes of Justinian”) in A.D. 529.

“School Room in Belknap St” (Richardson 65).¹¹ Throughout her exodus address, Stewart mourned immorality, foretold doom, and appeared to rise “at moments to a serene lyricism” (Richardson 23). While she attempted to reason with her enemies of justice and judgment to come, Stewart alluded to Isaiah 55:9: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are his ways above our ways, and his thoughts above our thoughts.” Stewart believed that God had, for purposes only known to Him, loosened her tongue and placed His words into her mouth “in order to put all those to shame” who had risen against her (“Farewell Address” 67). The very walls of her farewell address loiters an intertext of anamnesis:

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel [Judges 4:4]? Did not queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? (“Farewell Address” 68)

When she aligned her plight as a present day Black Woman Jeremiah with the plight biblical women endured when answering the call to social activism, Stewart challenged her audience to consider new and changing dimensions of the role of women in society. She shared a consciousness of how their sexual identities combined with their racial identities made their life situations and focus of their political struggles unique. Despite her aggressive tone, the audience would have understood the voice of feminist discourse in the context of equality and fairness for all women. At the same time, Stewart’s jeremiadic anamnesis kept her audience rooted in the greater standard of biblical witness. She denounced St. Paul’s declaration that it was a “shame for a woman to speak in public” and suggested that “our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offence than this”; He will not, she predicted, condemn her (“Farewell Address” 68). Stewart beseeched her audience to cease talking of prejudice, until it has been eliminated in America. “For while these evils exist,” she lamented, to talk of them is “like giving breath to the air, and labor to the wind” (“Farewell Address” 70-71). Stewart then ended her farewell address with one last lamentation: “bless those who have hated me, and cheerfully pray for those who have despitefully used and persecuted me” (“Farewell Address” 74).

¹¹ Richardson believes that the date 18 September 1833 was probably incorrect. Stewart recalled the date of the address a year after it was delivered. The speech was published, however, in *The Liberator* on 28 September 1833 (*Maria M. Stewart*, p. 64, 128).

Stewart Concluded Her Boston Jeremiads

Through all of its transformations, the perseverance of jeremiadic rhetoric in 1830s New England substantiated a remarkable nationalized authority that the rhetoric itself uncovered and created. During her Boston years, Maria Miller Stewart never vacillated from her position that the principal cause of African American subjugation and affliction lay within the control of White society. Engrained in Stewart's call to political and social activism is a jeremiadic discourse that progressed into a highly structured and effective vehicle she utilized to implant a sense of self-importance and uplift to her brethren. Stewart beckoned America to live up to its sacred principles. In doing so, she called her brethren, and sisters, to organize as a society of Christians. Stewart's jeremiads publicized her "celebratory vision of redemptive progress toward independence of body and spirit" (Richardson 16). As she lamented to her audience in her farewell address, "Let us follow after godliness, and the things which make for peace" she bemoaned, "cultivate your own minds and morals; real merit will elevate you" ("Farewell Address" 72). Stewart's persuasive voice in Boston's arena of abolitionism challenged the American consciousness. Her jeremiads were passionately evangelical, astutely filled with criticism and an unyielding declaration of the credence of natural and divine rights for African Americans. Receptive of "Afric's woes," Stewart's jeremiadic discourse, then, played a pivotal role in shaping Black Boston's social protest rhetoric. The structure of her jeremiads was prescribed by her pledge to oppose racial oppression and subjugation blacks suffered. Her jeremiadic rhetoric formed an array of new political agendas that eventually were used to create a viable new nationalized place for African Americans. She aided in establishing a jeremiadic tradition other Black Women Jeremiahs such as Sojourner Truth, Sarah Remond Parker, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Mary Ann Shadd Cary would adopt and utilize in the struggle for freedom, self-respect, and civil liberties.

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