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Celebrating and Sacralizing Violence: *Testimonies Concerning Ann Lee and the Early Shakers*

By Stephen J. Stein

Violence may function as an end in itself, or it may be symbolic of something else. Perpetrators of violence assume that their use of force will serve to damage or destroy; that at least is their goal in using violence. But the fact is that violence sometimes functions in very different ways for those on the receiving end. That may be especially true in situations where violence has been directed against religious leaders, groups, or institutions. What is intended by one party in the exchange may be interpreted and employed by the other party in vastly different fashion. Such was the case in the violence directed against Ann Lee (1736-1784), the English founder of the American Shaker community, and against her followers in both England and the American colonies.

In what follows it is my intention to identify briefly the religious claims of the Shakers, formally the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, to sketch some aspects of the early history of the community, and to describe the ways in which Ann Lee and her followers, also called Believers, were subjected to violence. Then I will examine the ways that the Shakers featured, utilized, and exploited the tales of violence against Lee and the early Believers—celebrating and sacralizing that violence for their own religious ends.

* * * * *

Ann Lee, one of eight children, was born in Manchester, England, in 1736, the daughter of a blacksmith. She received little or no formal education. Ann also married a blacksmith—Abraham Standerin—in

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1762, but there were no surviving children from the marriage. Hers therefore was a difficult marriage. At some point in the 1760s she joined cause with a group of religious enthusiasts led by James and Jane Wardley from nearby Bolton. That group, known as “Shakers,” trembled or shook when taken in ecstasy in worship. They also shouted, and danced, and witnessed in dramatic ways. They declared themselves the only true religion. Members of the community were arrested frequently for disturbing the peace and because they invaded the sanctuaries of other religious communities during times of formal worship and denounced those traditions. As a result, Ann Lee Standerin spent more than one night in the House of Correction, and she was also fined for her offensive behavior. These conflicts were part of the reason she decided to leave England in 1774 with her husband and a few fellow “Shakers.” They landed in New York City, but little is known about their situation over the next five years.

After 1779 the historical record becomes clearer. Ann Lee, who separated from her husband, along with the group moved north to Albany County where one of her followers had purchased some acreage. They settled in a district known as Niskeyuna. Much of what we know about this time comes from documents compiled many years later by Believers, drawing on their memory of earlier events. You know, of course, the larger political context at the time—the American Revolution was underway. That brought the Shakers a different kind of problem: they were pacifists and openly refused to support the war. As a result, a number of the members of the community, including Ann Lee, were imprisoned for a time in Albany and Poughkeepsie for being alleged British sympathizers.¹

But the Shakers attracted even more attention a bit later when they began to “open the gospel” throughout the region. Ann Lee’s “new and strange religion” made severe social demands upon her followers including the abandonment of marriage, of sexual relations, and of traditional family life. Over time the community elevated women to equal status with men and mandated the communal sharing of earthly possessions. The Shakers’ theological claims were even more striking. Ann Lee was elevated in the community’s eyes to the equivalent of Jesus. She was the Second Coming of Christ, and the beloved daughter of God—a parallel to Jesus, the beloved son of God. The offense presented by Shaker social practices and theological beliefs concerning Lee was unambiguous for most Americans. As a result, verbal abuse and physical violence against Lee and her followers were commonplace and ongoing.²

her into a sleigh, with as little ceremony as they would the dead carcass of a beast, and drove off, committing at the same time, acts of inhumanity and indecency which even savages would be ashamed of.” They tore her clothes in “a shameful manner,” intent on finding out “whether she was a woman or not.” They took Lee some three miles to a tavern whose owner had previously promised them “as much rum as they would drink” if they would bring Lee to his house. Eventually William Lee, Ann’s close brother, persuaded them to release her, which they agreed to as long as they would not be prosecuted “for what they had done.” Some of those who had “abused her shamefully” asked her forgiveness, to which Ann replied, “I can freely forgive you.” Ann Lee “repeatedly said, she never was so abused in all her life, as she was by this mob in Petersham.”²⁵

The *Testimonies* describes explicitly how these violent episodes impacted Ann Lee physically. On one occasion when the missionaries were headed back to Niskeyuna, Lee showed “some of the brethren from New-Lebanon ... the bruises she had received from her cruel persecutors. Her stomach and arms were beat and bruised black and blue; and she, and the sisters with her, informed them that she was black and blue all over her body; and indeed, it was not to be wondered at, considering how much she had been beaten and dragged about.”²⁶ There were also other judgments regarding the impact of the suffering experienced by the first Shakers on that missionary journey. One editorial gloss in the *Testimonies* reads, “During the period of two years and four months, the time of their absence from Neskeyuna, Mother and the Elders travelled many hundred miles, and suffered indescribable hardships, afflictions and persecutions, to establish the gospel in this land, and lay the foundation of Christ’s Kingdom on earth.”²⁷ Many are the terms that appear in the text referencing this violence—tribulation, travail, suffering, persecution, hardship, cries, groans, cruel abuses, etc.

But the editors of the *Testimonies* are also explicit about a salvific function of the violence directed against Ann Lee and her followers. In the “Preface” they asserted that the Believers’ “painful struggles and persevering fortitude, through many sufferings and much opposition” were critical in the effort “to plant the gospel and establish the foundation of Christ’s Kingdom in this land.”²⁸ At the heart of this “gospel” was the proclamation “that Christ did verily make his second Appearance in *Ann Lee*: That she was the chosen Witness of God to usher in a new dispensation of the gospel—to rend the vail of the flesh, which separated the soul

from God — to enter into the holy of holies, and become the first spiritual Mother of all the children of the resurrection.”²⁹

In other words, the *Testimonies* provides by indirection a statement of triumph over the opposition. The accounts that feature violence against the Believers and especially against Ann Lee document the ways that the Shaker gospel ultimately prevailed. The Shakers triumphed, of course, not by responding to violence with violence, or by resorting to greater violence or force, but by responding non-violently to the violence of their persecutors. In Shirley, Massachusetts, for example, a large mob surrounded the house in which Ann Lee and the elders were lodging, displaying “much railing and savage behavior” all night long. In the morning the Shakers refused to “come out” of the house, and, surprisingly, invited four leaders of the mob to “come into the house.” Ann Lee ordered her associates to “prepare some breakfast for them, saying, ‘We must feed our enemies, and so heap coals of fire upon their heads.’”³⁰ Unfortunately, that kindness did not deter the mob. Ultimately, they brutalized several male and female Believers, including James Whitaker and William Lee. When this confrontation finally ended, Ann Lee and the elders “with all the brethren and sisters, then kneeled down and prayed to God, to forgive their bloody persecutors. Elder James cried, ‘Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.’”³¹ Following the assault on Ann Lee that took place at Petersham described above, several of the men that brought her back to David Hammond’s house “appeared to be greatly ashamed of their wicked conduct, and confessed that they had abused her shamefully.” They asked forgiveness of Ann Lee. The *Testimonies* reads, “Mother replied, ‘I can freely forgive you; I hold nothing against you, and I pray God to forgive you.’”³²

Ann Lee and the elders with her came to understand that their roles in the salvation process involved suffering and persecution. When Ann Lee’s brother William died in 1784, the elders who spoke at his funeral described William’s “faithfulness: that he had been faithful to bear and suffer for the increase of the gospel, and that he had finished his work, and given up his life in sufferings.”³³ Similar judgments were offered concerning Lee. The *Testimonies* noted, “In times of tribulation she was often heard to say, ‘There is no sorrow like my sorrow.’ And surely,” added the editors, “there is no sorrow worthy to be compared with the sorrow that proceeds from a heart that is pure and holy before God, as Mother’s was.”³⁴ Perhaps the fullest summary judgment regarding the purpose of the woe Ann Lee experienced is the following: “Our blessed Mother, in laboring for the

The principal source documenting the difficulties that Lee and the emerging Shaker society experienced is a 400-page book published by the Believers in 1816, thirty-two years after Lee's death. It is entitled *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her through whom the Word of Eternal Life was Opened in this Day of Christ's Second Appearing: Collected from Living Witnesses*.³ The *Testimonies* was compiled and edited by two leading Shaker elders, Rufus Bishop and Seth Wells, who along with other Believers in the second decade of the nineteenth century feared that they might lose their collective memory of Ann Lee as the older Shakers who had interacted with her personally died off. Therefore they determined to gather the memories of those who had known Lee and to publish them in a form that could be shared with all Believers.

The *Testimonies*, however, is a problematic historical document. Even within the community it had a controversial history. It was compiled from those who were described as “eye and ear witnesses.” That would seem to make it excellent historical material. But the editors acknowledged that many of the testimonies, including some of the most important, had “been brought to remembrance by a special gift of God, after having been, as it were, entirely forgotten, for many years.”⁴ In other words, this was no ordinary historical record. The *Testimonies* was comprised of desired, requested, solicited, and encouraged memories from elderly Believers. Its manner of publication and distribution was also unusual. Relatively few copies were printed; those copies were distributed to the sixteen Shaker villages which existed at the time, scattered from Maine to Indiana. The book was read in public for a few years, but then the leaders of the society began to fear that it was creating a misunderstanding of Lee and of her ideas. As a result, the ministry withdrew the book and allowed only a few to have access to it. It became known as the “Secret Book of the Elders” until many years later when it was republished in 1888.⁵

Despite this controversial history, the *Testimonies* has long been regarded as *the* pivotal document in the early history of the Shakers and certainly in the story of Ann Lee. In some respects, it functioned for the Believers in much the same way that the biblical gospels functioned in the lives of the early Christians — providing an account of the founder's activities and teachings.⁶ Half or more of the volume is narrative, telling the story of Ann Lee — her birth, early years, religious activities in England, voyage to the New World, as well as her subsequent experiences as leader of the

growing Shaker society in America, and her death in 1784. Other portions of the volume record the teachings of “Mother Ann,” as she was called by her followers. Some of the more didactic material is contextualized as conversation between Lee and inquirers or converts; other sections are organized by specific topics, for example, “Prophecies, Visions and Revelations,” “Confession of Sin,” and “Miraculous Gifts.”

One of the principal themes throughout the *Testimonies* is the violence that Ann Lee experienced at the hands of opponents in both England and America. Three early chapters tell of her “sufferings” and “persecution” in England—those are the terms used by the editors.⁷ Her “sufferings” were a product of her labors, “crying to God” for her own “redemption.” Her flesh was “consumed” as “bloody sweat” poured through the “pores” of her skin.⁸ Other chapters tell of her experiencing physical violence or persecution in England. On one occasion, for example, one of her own brothers, offended by her religious claims, beat her violently in her “face and nose” with a staff.⁹ On several occasions, she was attacked by a mob “determined to put an end” to her existence.¹⁰ She was “knocked down with clubs” and “kicked,” and on another occasion thrown into a “*bulge place*,” a “deep vault of human excrements.”¹¹ Another time a mob tried to stone her and her colleagues.¹² These stories were collected by the editors of the *Testimonies* from Believers who said they had heard Ann tell of her persecution in England.

The violence directed against Ann Lee in America was detailed at even greater length. One additional biographical datum is needed to set the stage for these accounts. Lee and a handful of close associates left Niskeyuna and journeyed throughout New York and New England from May 1781 until September 1783. There was a logic to their travels. They moved from location to location, meeting with individuals or families that had responded favorably to the Shaker gospel. While visiting these converts and confirming their commitment, Ann Lee reached out to others. This extended missionary journey of almost two and a half years was a critical step in the growth and expansion of the Shaker society. On this journey however, Lee and her entourage were constantly challenged by individuals or groups who opposed them and their religious claims. They repeatedly experienced violence and hostility.

Listen to the ways the *Testimonies* documented the two sides of this journey. Here first is the positive side. At Harvard, Massachusetts, “the gospel increased and the testimony against the flesh prevailed.”¹³ At

Enfield, Connecticut, the missionaries “excited great joy and zeal among the Believers.”¹⁴ At Ashfield, Massachusetts, “the power of God was manifested in a marvellous manner.”¹⁵ At Cheshire, Massachusetts, the Believers “opened the gospel with great clearness; so that the wicked were confounded.”¹⁶ At New Lebanon, New York, “the power of God” was shown “with a mighty inward power and trembling.”¹⁷ On the return trip to Niskeyuna, at an outdoor meeting, the Believers “went forth in worship, with great power of God.”¹⁸

But now listen to the negative side. At Harvard, a mob of four hundred dragged Believers out of worship “with as little humanity as ravenous wolves would drag out harmless sheep from the fold.”¹⁹ At Enfield, a “mob, of about two hundred men” ordered the missionaries to leave town and threatened them if they did not comply.²⁰ At Ashfield, the Believers were “disturbed by ‘lewd fellows of the baser sort,’ who gathered for carnal and mischievous purposes.”²¹ At Cheshire, the “young people of the town” railed against Ann Lee “in the most vehement manner.”²² At New Lebanon, the opponents of the Shakers broke into the house “where the Believers were assembled,” using “much threatening and abusive language.”²³ On that return trip to Niskeyuna, a mob of “ruffians ... threw clubs and stones” at Nathan Farrington’s dwelling where Ann Lee and her companions were staying, “determined to break into the house.”²⁴

The most detailed account of violence against Ann Lee and the Believers in the *Testimonies* tells of an incident in December 1781 when the Shaker missionaries arrived in Petersham, Massachusetts, where the Thomas Shattuck family welcomed them. They held a religious meeting the next day, which was the Sabbath. On the following Monday evening, another gathering took place which attracted both “a considerable number of civil people” and “a company of lewd fellows” who called themselves “the *Blackguard Committee*.” In the midst of the proceedings, some of the lewd fellows extinguished the lights, and “three ruffians, painted black,” seized Ann Lee, attempting to drag her out of the house. They failed because several sisters “clinched hold of her.” Later in the evening, when the gathering had ended and the attendees had returned home, the house where Ann Lee was staying was assaulted again, this time by about thirty persons. They knocked down and cruelly beat David Hammond, the owner, and his wife Mary who was holding a young child. When they found Ann Lee hiding in a dark bedroom, they “immediately seized her by her feet, and inhumanly dragged her, feet foremost, out of the house, and threw

increase of the gospel, and the salvation of a lost world, passed through inexpressible sufferings: in this she was second to none but Christ, her Lord and head. She bore her sufferings with a degree of fortitude, patience and resignation worthy of the lot in which she stood, and which, many times appeared far more than human.”³⁵ The sufferings of Ann Lee were viewed as parallel to those of Jesus Christ, thereby reinforcing the concept of Lee as the female Christ figure, Ann the Beloved Daughter of God parallel to Jesus the Beloved Son of God. The *Testimonies* celebrated and sacralized the violence she experienced in parallel fashion to the celebration and sacralization of the violence directed against Jesus detailed in the New Testament gospels. That redemptive symmetry lies at the heart of the Shaker gospel.

Did the Believers who suffered derive any pleasure when those who persecuted them themselves experienced hardship? How generous were they in that matter? The *Testimonies* provides a limited view regarding the situation of the opponents of the Shakers, whom the Believers equated with the “Antichrist,” when they experienced hardship. Here one senses a kind of satisfaction on the part of the Believers with the difficulties of their opponents. The *Testimonies* notes, “There has, evidently, been a general blast upon those who have persecuted the work of God in Mother and the Elders.... It has most generally happened, that reprobates and persecutors have either come to nothing, and been fugitives and vagabonds upon earth, or else have died some untimely and extraordinary death.”³⁶ There was no sorrow expressed regarding that outcome. For example, with reference to that very difficult Petersham incident, the *Testimonies* writes, “Of those who persecuted Mother and the Elders in Petersham, we will remark, that Samuel Peckham, captain of militia, to whose house Mother was carried, run out of his interest, was reduced to poverty, and obliged to leave the town. His brother Robert Peckham, then a sheriff, also run out his interest, and left the town.”³⁷ It is difficult to read these accounts without sensing a measure of satisfaction on the part of the Shakers with these outcomes. Ultimately, therefore, in that sense, too, they triumphed over their enemies.

* * * * *

Opposition to the Shakers, of course, did not end with the founding generation. Violence against Believers continued throughout much of the antebellum period of American history as the society expanded and

pushed westward into the Ohio Valley. Opposition included attacks on missionaries who carried the Shaker gospel into the West, on new converts who accepted the social and theological views of the Believers, and on the villages they founded. Opponents of the Shakers used every means at their disposal to undermine the society. They seized and forcibly removed converts from the community against their will; they burned buildings at the Shaker villages; they stole and slaughtered cattle; they organized mobs to intimidate; they mounted legal challenges to property and parental rights; they published scandalous accounts of Shaker behavior. This essay is not the occasion to detail those actions.³⁸

It is, however, the case that in the face of continuing and expanding opposition, members of the Shaker society possessed a powerful religious tradition to which they could turn for consolation and support, and to which they did turn—namely, the story of the violence directed against Ann Lee and her associates and the success that the earliest Shakers enjoyed despite the hardship and persecution they experienced. The narrative and the teachings contained in the *Testimonies* were powerful tools for coping with the continuing difficulties. These stories and the counsel attached to them also strengthened the Shakers' resolve to deal peacefully with their opponents. In the decades following the publication of the *Testimonies*, faithful Believers celebrated and sacralized the tales of violence against Ann Lee and the first Believers because they provided a strategy for dealing with the difficulties they themselves were encountering.

This same non-violent strategy was often employed by other alternative or dissenting religious movements which arose in the context of the new nation. It was, in fact, a general pattern, though there were exceptions. New religious movements often faced persecution and hostility. Only rarely did such groups meet that violence with counter-violence or force. More frequently such communities recognized their vulnerability and strategized against confrontation, choosing to respond to violence with non-violence.

Notes

1. Biographical studies of Lee include Nardi Reeder Campion, *Mother Ann Lee: Morning Star of the Shakers*, 2nd ed. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1990); and Richard Francis, *Ann the Word: The Story of Ann Lee, Female Messiah, Mother of the Shakers, The Woman Clothed with the Sun* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

2. General histories of the Shakers include Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963); and Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
3. Hereafter referred to as the *Testimonies*, which was printed in Hancock, Massachusetts, by “J. Tallcott & J. Deming, Junrs.”
4. *Testimonies*, iv.
5. Stein, *Shaker Experience*, 82-84, 333.
6. Daniel W. Patterson describes the *Testimonies* as containing the “core” of Ann Lee’s teachings in *The Shaker Spiritual* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 63.
7. *Testimonies*, 43 and 50.
8. *Testimonies*, 48.
9. *Testimonies*, 53-54.
10. *Testimonies*, 54.
11. *Testimonies*, 55-56.
12. *Testimonies*, 58.
13. *Testimonies*, 99-100
14. *Testimonies*, 103
15. *Testimonies*, 135.
16. *Testimonies*, 159.
17. *Testimonies*, 173.
18. *Testimonies*, 195.
19. *Testimonies*, 115-16.
20. *Testimonies*, 103.
21. *Testimonies*, 138.
22. *Testimonies*, 159.
23. *Testimonies*, 178.
24. *Testimonies*, 197.
25. *Testimonies*, 92-98.
26. *Testimonies*, 195-96.
27. *Testimonies*, 202.
28. *Testimonies*, v.
29. *Testimonies*, vi.
30. *Testimonies*, 148.
31. *Testimonies*, 155.
32. *Testimonies*, 97.
33. *Testimonies*, 342.
34. *Testimonies*, 345.
35. *Testimonies*, 347.
36. *Testimonies*, 382.
37. *Testimonies*, 386.
38. For a brief account of the western expansion, see Stein, *Shaker Experience*, 57-66.