

Book Reviews

Elizabeth Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 224. ISBN 9781107095519. Hardcover, £81.00.

Elizabeth Bouldin's compelling study on women's prophecy in the early modern period takes us to little-explored territory, both figuratively and literally. Focussing on the late expression of the peak of women's prophetic writing in mid-seventeenth-century England, Bouldin tackles the texts of radical Protestant women who prophesied between the British Civil Wars and the Great Awakening. The proliferation of radical Protestant groups during this time produced, in Bouldin's words, 'the first great wave of female prophecy in the British Atlantic' (p. 2). The dissenting communities represented in this study are mainly German Pietists—northern European Protestants who sought for further Reformed churches—the French Prophets—radical Calvinists who arrived in London from southern France in the first decades of the eighteenth century—General and Particular Baptists, English Philadelphians and the Quakers.

Bouldin's analysis identifies the prophets' religious and national affiliations of their respective groups as a typical feature of early modern Protestantism, including their transnational and transconfessional nature. Bouldin is interested in showing how prophets would not just travel the Atlantic but also correspond with others from different nationalities and religious groups and establish various links, often emphasising their theological discrepancies. Their claim to election was at the core of their discussions. The various approaches to election are thus examined in Chapter 1 in the context of the Civil Wars and their aftermath: specifically, how Sarah Wight, Katherine Sutton and Mary Cary relied on election as a rhetorical tool that allowed them to ground their identity as prophets and establish 'imagined communities of elect persons' (p. 17) within their nation. As Bouldin rightly notes, the concept of predestination was the bedrock of seventeenth-century theology, as well as a point of contention in England and the American colonies with regard to the interplay of free will and grace in determining salvation. Bouldin highlights the examples of Antoinette Bourignon

and the English Quaker Joan Whitrowe, who opposed the Calvinist doctrine of election by offering anti-Calvinist interpretations of the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau as told in Romans 9, which was typically invoked as indicative of predestination and reprobation. Instead, Whitrowe interpreted the story as posing a situation that allowed the individual to choose good over evil. Quaker prophecies of the period often referred to the elect in a collective sense as belonging to the 'holy seed'; they were 'living stones' who formed a Church. This Church, rather than the soul of the individual, was predestined to election. As Bouldin suggests, collective election was attractive for prophets, Quaker ones in particular, because it gave justification to their sufferings.

The connections between prophecy, a sense of community and election is further looked at as an intrinsic part of seventeenth-century Quaker women. Early on, as the Quaker sense of community developed as a result of seeing themselves as a persecuted people, they related to biblical Israel and its prophets. Bouldin reminds readers of the importance Quakers gave to the printing and circulation of their works to project the idea of a unified movement. As Quakers travelled to different locations in the 1670s their networks sought to reinforce communal ties, while, at the same time, they assimilated into their new communities, a process that often forced them to change their narrative as a persecuted group. In this way, prophetic speech began to be supervised and even censored by the congregation and Quaker notions of community became more institutional than spontaneous as a genuine response to the Friends' persecution. Bouldin's originality in tracing the doctrinal evolution of women Quaker prophets is remarkable, as in the case of Joan Whitrowe. By the end of the seventeenth century her adoption of mystical millenarianism is closer to that of Philadelphians in that her pamphlets 'invoked the image of the apocalyptic woman described in Revelation 12, a key figure in the writings of Behmenist millenarians such as Ann Bathurst and Jane Lead' (p. 87). Bouldin looks at the ways the ideology and the organisational zest of Quaker groups influenced and were influenced wherever they went, particularly in America, where their preeminence as a nonconformist group earned them a reputation 'in broader society for the commercial success of its trading networks' (p. 87). Bouldin marks the point that the Friends' high visibility as a religious collective integrated them in several areas of civic life, including business, which helps explain why other dissenting groups in Europe and the British Isles sought to liaise with the Quakers.

In Chapter 3, Bouldin's focus on Behmenism illuminates the relationship between prophet and follower as well as the significance of the trope of the 'apocalyptic woman'—as the Pietist philosopher and Bourignon promoter Pierre Poiret would show in his writings by comparing her labour pains being 'similar to those of the women in Revelation 12 when one of her followers experienced a conversion' (p. 117). Bouldin argues that, with this turn in prophetic female imagery under the influence of Behmenism, women's prophecy gravitated away from the political and leaned towards the establishment of a true Church of

believers within ‘a corrupt society’, while keeping the radical implications of election and the anticipation of a millenarian transformation of society. The emphasis on the relationship between prophet and follower, which could involve large audiences, created a crisis in authority when reports of miraculous healings took place or when prophesying became ‘too theatrical’.

Bouldin deals with these aspects in Chapter 4 with several lesser-known case studies, such as those of prophets Mary Keimer or Anna Maria King. The dramatisation of the prophetic act triggered attacks on religious enthusiasm that were widespread in the first decades of the eighteenth century. In the closing chapter Bouldin argues how letter-writing networks among dissenters, which often dealt with election and circulated in a transnational setting, helped radical Protestants as a whole group united in its diversity to consolidate their structures in the public sphere—which included publication—and negotiate different types of prophetic revival in the mid-eighteenth-century Great Awakening: whether communities rejected religious enthusiasm, or embraced it moderately or completely, prophecy gave way to a trans-European concept of election.

Elizabeth Bouldin’s study enhances our understanding of late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century women’s prophecy as a trans-national phenomenon that is articulated around the notion of election. It adds to a current scholarly interest in explaining prophecy as a corpus, from theological approaches focused on a specific community, such as the Baptists,¹ or a complex figure such as Jane Lead,² to a more literary approach.³ It can also be of special interest to those studying the social influence and outreach of Quaker prophecy in the formation of a Quaker identity in America. Bouldin’s volume makes a solid contribution to the large prophetic corpus by women in the early modern period with a convincing incursion into why and how hundreds of women in religious movements sought their own way of expression within and beyond their national and linguistic communities across the Atlantic.

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1 Adcock, R., *Baptist Women’s Writings in Revolutionary Culture, 1640–1680*, London, New York: Routledge, 2015.

2 Hessayon, A. (ed.), *Jane Lead and her Transnational Legacy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

3 Font, C., *Women’s Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain*, London, New York: Routledge, 2017.