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## The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Women's Ordination Controversy, 1898-1900: A Case Study on the Value of Racial Inclusivity in Religious Studies

In recent decades the discipline of religion and others have been called upon to be more inclusive or multicultural in their approach to both teaching and research. An ever increasing number of scholars from various racial, ethnic, geographical, and gender backgrounds or identities have posed daring new questions for what was once practically male, Eurocentric scholarship. To be sure, these new endeavors have occasioned a great deal of pain for many accustomed to the status quo. There have been many charges of excesses leveled against the newer inclusive scholarship and scholars that in some instances rival the very real, demonstrable excesses of the older approach. But this new research has brought all of us to a clearer understanding of our respective disciplines. We have found, for example, that explorations into African American religious history have clarified our understanding of American religious history in general. How can we truly claim to understand the rise, development, spread, and impact of American evangelicalism without comprehending the leadership and participation of African Americans in that enterprise? So, not only does a study of African American religion complete the picture from the perspective of inclusivity; it also illumines the general portrait of American reli-

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gion. This same principle can be employed across the various fields and subfields of religious study regarding the utility of racial and cultural inclusivity.

This article examines one specific area, the controversy within the black AME Zion Church over women's ordination during the 1898-1900 period, to demonstrate not only the theological vitality of Black Christians at the turn of the twentieth century, but also to show the interconnectedness of all American religion, Black and nonBlack. In my own research I have attempted to answer the general question: how do people who experience marginalization, ostracism, oppression, and exclusion utilize their religion as a tool to achieve political, economic, social, and even religious freedom? A larger and related question is: what role has religion played in efforts to effect socio-economic and political reform, whether from the perspective of the targets of mistreatment, their sympathizers outside a given group, or those hostile to or grossly indifferent to the yearning of people to be free.

The following pages will demonstrate that black Christians, while deeply and most profoundly concerned with socio-economic, political issues relating to race, also wrestled with issues not necessarily race specific in character. While I suspect most of the mainline American Christian denominations, along with Reform and Conservative Judaism, have by now given an official "yes" answer to the question of gender equity in religious circles, practical challenges and problems connected with the full implementation of gender equity await final resolution. Some denominations have witnessed secessions from their ranks, if not over the woman's ordination issue solely or principally, then certainly that issue combined with others. Furthermore, there are still large bodies of Christians, indeed those representing the majority of worldwide Christendom, that have not even given an official "yes" reply to the issue of gender equity.<sup>1</sup> Those groups that have embraced women's ordination

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<sup>1</sup>This is particularly true of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

mainly have done so within the last three or four decades. I am speaking of mainline Christian denominations since I am aware that there are many smaller groups, particularly within the Pentecostal-Holiness tradition, that have recognized female equity in religious leadership for some time.

It may surprise many of us to learn that some American denominations wrestled with the issue of women's ordination and full equity in the church during the 1860-1920 era. The Methodist Protestant Church, a group that seceded from the Methodist Episcopal Church, later United Methodist, in the early nineteenth century took a bold step toward female equity. One annual conference of the denomination officially ordained women ministers. While the larger body did not follow that path, it did not repudiate or seek to invalidate the actions of that annual conference. In 1885 Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (not AME Zion) ordained Sarah A. Hughes as deacon, but that action was later invalidated by the general church, not to mention a refusal to recognize women at the highest ministerial rank of elder. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, therefore, holds the distinction as the only mainline church, black or non-black, that recognized complete gender equity in religious circles as early as 1900. While women might have receive "full" ordination to the ministry in certain congregations or subdivisions of other denominations, the AMEZ is the only mainline Christian body of which I am aware that officially recognized women's ordination throughout the denomination.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Stephen Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), pp. 181-184 treats Turner's ordination of Hughes to the diaconate in the AME Church and that denomination's invalidation of it. For women's ordination in the Methodist Protestant Church, see Emory Stevens Bucke, General Editor, *The History of American Methodism*, Volume II [of three volumes] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), pp. 405-406. William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: The Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, NC: The AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), pp. 111-112, provides a brief overview of the enhancement of women's status in the Zion Church during this era.

### The Nature of the Controversy

The controversy that rocked the AME Zion Church during the 1898-1900 years began with the ordination of the Reverend Mrs. Mary J. Small to the order of elder by Bishop Calvin C. Pettey upon recommendation of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Annual Conference in 1898. Previously, women had been granted preaching license and ordained as deacons in Zion. But the ordination of a woman to the highest level of ministry, the eldership, with authority to pastor churches, administer the sacraments, and become candidates for the bishopric, was a novel step for Zion as well as for most other Christian denominations during this era. The central question in the debate was not the character or educational qualifications of the Reverend Small but the legitimacy of ordaining women to the ministry. The broader issue was the complete equality of women in all spheres of church life.

There were several major responses to the ordination of Small: complete opposition and a demand that the General Conference, the highest judicatory in the connection, rescind the ordination, as exemplified by the Reverend S. A. Chambers; full support of women's equality in all aspects of church life, including eldership, as illustrated by Bishop John B. Small; moderate opposition that strongly denied the religious basis for ordination of women but recognized that denominational law as currently written gave Small the right to seek ordination and thus tended not to push for nullification of *her* ordination by the General Conference, as depicted by Elder John W. Smith and layperson B. F. Grant; and there were a number of responses from women in support of the Reverend Mrs. Small, as represented by Mrs. Sarah Pettey and others. Based upon materials available to me, women took little direct part in the debate, that is, as it unfolded in the denominational paper, *The Star of Zion*. Perhaps this scarcity of input revolves round the ministerial context of the debate. I would also imagine that many women

were also firm adherents of the traditionalist camp, some of whom perhaps held to the conviction that women should not participate in such publicly controversial and even acrimonious displays. In this article we shall examine each of the above positions and close with an analysis of the resolution of the debate and its significance.

Both sides in the controversy hailed the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice and appealed to it to support their respective positions. It was the interpretive principle that differed. The progressives (i.e., regarding this issue) focused on those passages that supported gender equity; the conservatives or traditionalists (again, regarding this issue) appealed to those passages that justified or argued the subordination of women to men. The progressives defended their position of support for women's ordination along a number of lines. First, they emphasized biblical passages pointing to gender equity in principle and concrete instances of women's leadership in the Old and New Testaments. Second, they downplayed those biblical passages that counseled the subordination of women by claiming that they spoke to specific situations and particular set of problems that no longer applied or the proscriptions had been subsequently invalidated in Scripture. Third, they used the argument of "historical progressivism," that history, inspired by the principles of the Bible and the Christian faith, has progressively unfolded greater truths and freedoms. Thus, what might have been unthinkable, even to Christ's first century disciples, are much clearer and acceptable to his followers in later epochs. Fourth, from a practical point of view, the current church required the labors of women ministers to offset the dereliction of duty by so many male ministers.

For the sake of space, we might succinctly state that the opponents of women's ordination or the traditionalists either denied each of the above or insisted that none of them should be employed to circumvent biblical and church traditions that prohibited women's ordination as elders. Occasionally, a traditionalist would put

forth an argument that women were not physically capable of enduring the physical strain associated with the job of pastors, or that a wife's ordination might cause disharmony in the marital relationship, or that women parishioners would not submit to the pastoral authority of females as they would to that of males. But these latter arguments were clearly secondary to their insistence that the Bible and church tradition unambiguously opposed ordination of women to roles where they would exercise authority over men.

At the center of the controversy was Mary Julia Blair Small (1850-1945). A native of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Small was converted on October 26, 1873, at the age of twenty-three, three years after she had wedded the elder (later Bishop) John B. Small. From her childhood Mrs. Small envisioned herself as a foreign missionary, a dream that was partly realized when her husband became bishop with specially assigned jurisdiction over the African churches. Mrs. Small had not always approved of women preachers and did not surrender to the call to preach until January 21, 1892, the year John E. Price, a presiding elder in the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference, granted her preaching license. Three years later Bishop Alexander Walters ordained her deacon. In 1898 Mrs. Small received ordination as elder. A vigorous evangelist, Small was a modest woman of sterling character, as attested by all the parties of the debate. By 1898 she had held many evangelistic gatherings in places of the northeast such as Rochester, Brooklyn, and various cities and towns in Pennsylvania. In 1912 she became the third president of the Woman's Home and Foreign Mission Society, an office she held until 1916. She died in 1945, one month shy of 95 years of age.<sup>3</sup>

Before examining this debate, the reader might note that the

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<sup>3</sup>For sketches of Mary J. Small, see *The Star of Zion's* (Charlotte, NC) reprint of a *York (PA) Daily* article, November 17, 1898, p. 7; Wall, *Zion*, pp. 111-112, 260, 404, 586; David Henry Bradley, Sr., *A History of the AME Zion Church*, II, (Nashville, TN: The Parthenon Press, 1970), pp. 78, 233, 236, 384, 393-394.

Reverend Mrs. Julia Foote received ordination to elder in November 1900 from Bishop Alexander Walters of the New Jersey Annual Conference just prior to her death. It is important to note that Foote, Small, and other women, such as Florence Randolph, were already *active* ministers prior to ordination. Whether it was a political move to make Small, the wife of a current bishop, the first of these women to be ordained elder is unknown. Quite possibly, the bishops reasoned that a bishop's wife might escape heavy criticism and thus pave the way for other women to receive elder's orders. But neither her spousal relationship nor possible church politics should obscure the reality that Small was in fact a bona fide minister who had already played a great role in missionary work for the connection.

### S. A. Chambers Opposes the Ordination

One of the earliest respondents to Small's ordination was the Reverend S. A. Chambers of Rock Hill, South Carolina, and we shall employ his arguments as representative of the traditionalist camp. Chambers was an excellent example of that type of ministers who came out unapologetically and clearly against the ordination of women to eldership. In his June 16, 1898 front page article in the *Star*, Chambers claimed that he was neither prejudiced against women nor fearful of ministerial rivalry from them. He simply wished to uphold biblical authority. He called for the General Conference to nullify the actions in the Small case because the annual conference had transcended its authority.<sup>4</sup> Chambers proceeded to outline his belief that the Bible, the only authority for the church, offered no warrant for women's ordination, claiming neither Christ nor the Apostles had commissioned women to engage in the ministry. The Rock Hill minister was quite clear that women's

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<sup>4</sup>*Star*, June 16, 1898, p. 1.

church work was unequal in authority to that of men.

Soon, the minister warned, women will become "pastors, presiding elders and Bishops." He was absolutely firm in his total rejection of "this petticoat ministry." "I as much doubt a woman's call to the ministry as I do my ability to fly."<sup>5</sup> It seems difficult to abstain from reading not only a biblical opposition to women's ministry but perhaps even a degree of misogyny in Chambers's statements. Given the substance and tone of Chambers's argument, even some opponents of women's ordination might have found themselves agreeing with Bishop Small's interpretation of some ordination critics. "There are those who attempt to crush others with the word of God — and the way some men talk of women, we are sorry for their mothers, and pity their wives."<sup>6</sup>

Within a few weeks Chambers found himself responding to a number of arguments from the Reverend J. H. Gilmer, Jr., of Booneville, North Carolina, a strong proponent of women's ordination.<sup>7</sup> He found ridiculous Gilmer's contention that woman's subordination to man had been "probationary," until greater truth was received by the church, and puzzled over the source for such a perspective. Whereas Gilmer might have read the Genesis account of women's subordination after the Fall as a prediction, not a curse, Chambers clearly saw it as the latter. If that curse was to be obliterated, said Chambers, only God, not humanity should do it. The South Carolina minister reminded his opponent that the Bible spoke of man as the head of woman,<sup>8</sup> which meant that man obviously was superior to woman in the "social," "business," and the religious facets of life. Chambers regarded Gilmer's contention — that even Christ had not revealed the whole truth to the disciples because of their inability to receive the truth — as so non-sensical that he dismissed it abruptly, not bothering to prepare a detailed

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>*Star*, August 18, 1898, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>*Star*, June 30, 1898, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>*Star*, July 21, 1898, p. 5.



response.<sup>9</sup>

Chambers attacked with equal relish Gilmer's argument that the Apostle Paul had ordained women (cf. Romans, 16th Chapter). These women, wrote the minister, had helped Paul in local church work, as many conscientious women were currently doing. But to claim that the women in Rome had been ordained was going too far. Paul did not engage in "double dealing." What he commanded, he also practiced: women must not preach or legislate in the church. Chambers closed his article by daring Gilmer to respond with an argument more carefully crafted and effective.<sup>10</sup>

Between Gilmer's first article and Chamber's response, another clergyperson had offered his strong support for women's ordination in the pages of the *Star*, the Reverend B. J. Bolding of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>11</sup> While Bolding's article depicted a fascinating view of history as progressively unfolding in favor of greater rights for women, it largely failed to deal with the issues that were most significant for the traditionalists, those relating to biblical authority. In his reply, Chambers kept the discussion on traditionalists' territory.<sup>12</sup> First, Chambers correctly observed that his critic had offered no biblical authority as proof for his position. Second, wrote Chambers, to say that the Methodist founder John Wesley, while commissioning lay women preachers, refused to ordain them because he was a "strict Churchman" was a very good point — for Chambers's argument, not Bolding's! So, was Bolding saying that the leaders of Zion who endorsed women's ordination were not strict churchmen, that they were following paths not plainly warranted by scripture? As for Bolding's charge that women preachers might be needed because so many male ministers had

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>*Star*, July 7, 1898, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>*Star*, July 28, 1898, p. 2.

been derelict in their duties, Chambers responded that there was no such necessity for women preachers during the time of Wesley or in 1898, and women preachers were "becoming more and more offensive every day."

Finally, Chambers responded to Bolding's claim that a General Conference had no right to nullify the ordination of an annual conference made in consonance with the church discipline. Since the Bible is the supreme and only authority in matters of Christian faith and practice, the General Conference certainly had the right to abrogate an action taken in direct opposition to biblical teachings. The Bible, he said, was a divine and eternally authoritative book, not a human one. To say that the Bible is incomplete and insufficient, that its counsels must be enlarged upon with other sources, is to question the sufficiency and sovereignty of God. In other words, traditionalists were claiming that any imperfection in the Bible rendered belief in an all sovereign God untenable or at least suspect. To ordain women as elders was contradicting the Bible and thus usurping God's authority. Securing support from traditionalist minded Zionites would require more detailed, biblically-based arguments.

### Bishop Small Defends the Ordination

Mary J. Small during much of the 1898 debate was ill or recuperating. Perhaps that explains the absence of any response on her part that I have been able to locate. Her husband, however, the Reverend Bishop John Bryan Small (1845-1905), came vigorously to her defense. Serving as bishop for less than nine years, Small made quite an impact upon the church. Born in Barbados, then a West Indies colony of Great Britain, Small, traveling to England in 1871, stopped in the United States and joined the AMEZ denomination. Ordained a deacon in 1872 and elder in 1873, Small also served as presiding elder in the New England and the Philadelphia

and Baltimore Conferences. In May 1896, Small was elevated to the bishopric. Thus, when this controversy arose, Small had served in the episcopacy for little more than two years. Small was keenly interested in African missions and held distinction as a great thinker, writer, and theologian in Zion.<sup>13</sup>

Bishop Small's defense of Mary Small included the outrage of a husband whose virtuous wife had been or was being theologically and ecclesiastically "violated" by some of her male colleagues in the ministry. As early as June 1898 Bishop Small boldly declared that he had been patient and forbearing long enough.<sup>14</sup> His letter to the *Star* focused upon two major outrages. First, Elder Small had been effectively excommunicated from her church by one of the presiding elders of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference, the Reverend W. H. Snowden, when he ruled that she was not a member of the York, Pennsylvania church or any particular church since she had been granted a *missionary* certificate. Though Snowden denied that his decision related to the ordination matter, many contemporary observers made that connection. Second, Elder Small had endured unnecessary and unfair treatment regarding her ordination. She had served as deacon for four, rather than the normal two, years prior to ordination as elder and had witnessed her ordination service delayed for two days despite her illness. Bishop Small made it clear that he demanded justice for his wife and would oppose those who mistreated her.<sup>15</sup>

Bishop Small not only defended his wife's ordination on the grounds of church law, he also echoed other arguments made on behalf of women's ordination and provided the most in depth and continuous defense of women's ordination to appear in the *Star*. In

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<sup>13</sup>Walls, *Zion*, pp. 586-587; and Bradley, *History*, II, p. 388.

<sup>14</sup>*Star*, June 16, 1898, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>*Star*, June 16, 1898, p. 6 and September 1, 1898, p. 6. Also see Snowden's article in *Star*, July 28, 1898, p. 6.

the August 11, 1898 issue, Bishop Small made it clear that he considered the ordination of women to the ministry a serious step that had to be taken with due deliberation.<sup>16</sup> Like other proponents, the prelate used the argument of historical progress. Christianity, he argued, worked to lift women from oppression. A naturalized American citizen, Small claimed that Americans' love for the Gospel and the opportunities for women's advancement were two things about the country that attracted him. Small argued that the Church must move beyond bigotry and "oppressive legislation" to embrace progress.

In the subsequent issue of the *Star*, Small dealt more specifically with the objections raised against women's ordination. The bishop noted that at one time he too opposed women's ministry but came to the conclusion that it was far better to accept the woman's declaration of her call than to risk standing in the way of God. Subsequently, he came to a biblically based position that women's ordination was indeed the will of God. First, Small dealt with words attributed to Paul, "I suffer not a women to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to [learn] in silence." Using an argument often employed by proponents of women's ordination, Small claimed these words constituted a "declaration," a statement of Paul's practice in particular situations, and not "an injunction" to be followed as a universal rule.<sup>17</sup> Of course critics quickly noted that the biblical writer of these and related words (not the Apostle Paul, according to the consensus of critical scholarship) made no such distinction. Many interpreters, for and against women's ordination, still consider statements found in places such as I Corinthians and I Timothy to have been intended as universal rules restricting religious leadership to males.

In the third installment of his defense, Small continued the

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<sup>16</sup>*Star*, August 11, 1898, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>*Star*, August 18, 1898, p. 1. Small's reply to the critics of Mrs. Small's ordination is spread over at least three issues of the *Star*.

treatment of biblical passages attributed to Paul, particularly those in I Corinthians and I Timothy.<sup>18</sup> His argument in this issue was a bit weightier. Small claimed that if one read these words as injunctions rather than declarations for particular circumstances, then the church should not permit women to speak in any context. A literal reading of those words as injunctions would render all women's prayer, speaking, and witnessing for Christ in the Church unacceptable. Such a censure of women's participation would be counterproductive to the mission of evangelism. This was a weighty argument in part because many opponents of women's ordination as elders or even as deacons did favor licensing women for missionary preaching, even when this preaching addressed gender mixed audiences or congregations. Surely such activities were not learning in silence and submission!

Bryan continued his argument. Certainly the great Apostle could not have meant women's silence as a literal, universal injunction. Had the Apostle himself not in a number of places, such as Philippians 4:3, lauded women as coworkers, "fellow laborers," as "yokefellow[s]"? One acting as a co-laborer with the Apostle could not be one acting in silence. Not only did Paul commend certain women leaders but called upon others to assist them in their endeavors. What were the reasons for "Paul's" words regarding women's silence in the church, according to Small? The bishop pointed out that the apostle mainly missionized Gentiles, including the Greeks. It was a part of the Greek polytheistic traditions that gods would be attracted to women in the temples. This led to ritual prostitution, a practice clearly at variance with Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

Some Greek husbands, to protect their wives from the desires of deities, required their wives to wear veils and a servant to accompany them. When Paul came to Corinth, he found two classes of

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<sup>18</sup>*Star*, August 25, 1898, pp. 2, 5.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

women: one, educated and capable of preaching, but immoral; the other having moral character but lacking preaching abilities. No wonder, given such circumstances, Paul declared that women should remain silent so that neither class would corrupt the faith. He would not write such declarations to the church at Philippi because women were of higher moral character.<sup>20</sup> If such was the case, a critic might wonder, why would "Paul" not counsel that women remain silent *until they learned how to exercise leadership gifts*? In addition, the passage in I Timothy clearly related women's exclusion from religious leadership to the will of God based upon the disobedience of the first woman, Eve. Biblical traditionalists did not find this argument persuasive.

But Small pursued a line of argument of greater substance relative to the possibility of a persuasive appeal to the traditionalist camp. He posited that prophet/esses were superior to preachers. The latter "preaches the word of God as it passed through other hands, and sometimes with a considerable [amount?] of his own views." The prophet/ess on the other hand, "receives the unadulterated word from the mouth of God, and delivers it to the people. All prophets, therefore, are preachers; but all preachers are not prophets. Surely the place of a prophet must be higher than that of a preacher unordained or ordained." Having stated this premise, Small canvassed both the Old Testament and New Testament, identifying women prophets or prophetesses.

Small cited the following prophetesses: Miriam, the sister of Aaron (and Moses), who at the Red Sea led women in rejoicing and praising God through inspired words; Deborah, who exercised considerable authority and direction over men; Huldah, the interpreter of the newly discovered book of the Law in II Kings 22; and Anna, who prophesied concerning the child Jesus.<sup>21</sup> The bishop

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

called attention to the four prophesying daughters in Philippi in Acts and the women in the Gospels who boldly carried the first news of Christ's resurrection back to the disciples. The bishop, furthermore, claimed that women in biblical times had received ordination. He called attention to the deacon(ess) Phoebe in Romans and Priscilla in Acts who actually instructed "an eloquent Gospel preacher." It was clear to Small that the Bible did not forbid ordination of women, that any declarations to that effect referred only to specific, local situations dealing with particular sets of circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

### The Moderate Opposition and Women Defenders of Small

Some Zionites opposed women's ordination in principle but believed that Mrs. Small had been legitimately ordained as elder under denominational law. While the Reverend and future bishop John W. Smith, editor of the denominational *Star*, vigorously opposed women's ordination, he did not regard the specific ordination of the Reverend Mrs. Small as contrary to church discipline and did not foresee the General Conference convening in 1900 as likely overturning it.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Smith did not blame Small for the ordination. She had merely exercised her right under the connectional discipline that by eliminating "male" had granted women absolute equality in all facets of church life. Nor would it be legally proper to abrogate her ordination since church law had permitted it. Assuming that the bishops did not buck the general consensus of the Zion Church and ordain another woman elder prior to the General Convention in 1900, Smith felt confident that Mrs. Small would "be the first and the last woman elder made by Zion Connection." He closed his article stating that the church, when eliminating the word "male" from its church law, had no intention

<sup>22</sup>*Star*, September 1, 1898, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup>*Star*, August 8, 1898, p. 4.

of ordaining female elders. This great ambition on the part of the proponents of women's ordination to make history might one day prove to be a terrible mistake, he claimed.<sup>24</sup>

This opposition-in-principle-but-support-as-legal-right position was shared by others in the Zion denomination. The Reverend F. M. Jacobs, a college graduate, actually appeared to chastise many current opponents of Small's ordination, claiming that some ministers had been so desirous of being the most progressive Methodist connection regarding women's rights that, contrary to the sound warning they had received at the time, they proceeded to amend the discipline in the 1870s in such a way that women gained absolute equality and the opportunity to seek any office in the church, including elder or even bishop. Now some of these same individuals were fighting a *fait accompli* when their efforts might have been more effectively employed to defeat the original proposal.<sup>25</sup>

B. F. Grant, layperson in the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference, offered a perspective that suggested some residue of resentment by the male laity against the male clergy dating back some years surrounding the issue of women's rights in the church. This layperson claimed that as a delegate to the 1898 annual conference he voted in favor of Small's ordination, not because he favored the idea in principle, but because there was no basis in denominational law to vote against Small. Grant had no sympathy for the clergy critics of Small's ordination, who quite enthusiastically had eliminated "male" and "female" from the church discipline, thus granting women equal rights, even more than "the great M[ethodist]. E[piscopal]. Church." Given the church law and the fact that Small had clearly met the requirements, she merely requested what was her right. Grant noted with apparent glee that a number of male ministers were greatly upset over Small's ordination and suggested that these ministers were quite willing to award

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Star, July 21, 1898, p. 1.



women equity as long as it applied only to *lay* men and not to *clergy* men. What the male ministers had planned for the lay men had now come back upon them.<sup>26</sup>

Not only did Bishop Small and other male clergy and some lay men come to the defense of Mrs. Small, but some women offered support for her in the pages of the denominational newspaper. In 1896 Mrs. Sarah E. C. Dudley Pettey, wife of Bishop Pettey, started a weekly "Woman's Column" in the *Star* as a voice for the Woman's Home and Foreign (now Overseas) Missionary Society, for which she had served as treasurer (1892-1896) and was current executive secretary.<sup>27</sup> In her column in the June 23, 1898 issue of *The Star of Zion*, Mrs. Pettey did not directly join the debate over Small's ordination but hailed the connection as "progressive" regarding equal rights for women. Referring to the action of a previous General Conference that had eliminated gender descriptions from the discipline, Mrs. Pettey, like other proponents of women's ordination, praised the church for enlarging opportunities for women. Her article spelled out Small's qualifications: her diaconate experience, eloquence and forcefulness, and "a most excellent record as an evangelist."<sup>28</sup>

Mrs. Carissa Betties in December 1898 offered strong words of support to Mrs. Small. She warned males not to oppose the will of God and encouraged the Reverend Small to remember that God had angels watching over God's children. Betties exhorted Small, "You are right; go, and as you go, preach." Male preachers who opposed her ordination had risen too late: Small had already been ordained according to church law. Reflecting the argument that women ministers were needed to perform ministries that some men left undone, Betties wrote to the men, "Let her alone; she is doing

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<sup>26</sup>*Star*, June 23, 1898, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup>For biographical details about Sarah Pettey, see Walls, *Zion*, 408-409, 413, 421.

<sup>28</sup>*Star*, June 23, 1898, p. 5.

what you won't do." Nor did it matter that some male ministers subjected Small to name calling; her call to preach was more valid than that of some male preachers. "Some men heard a mule bray and said that God had called them to preach."<sup>29</sup>

The comments of the woman editor of the Tennessee newspaper, *Bristol Ship*, reprinted in the *Star* during the summer of 1898 offered a curious blend of theological conservatism, relative to women ministers, but a feminist commitment to women rights. While she did not support the idea of women's ordination or preaching, the unnamed editor was greatly disturbed by the attempt of many male opponents to suppress Mrs. Small's ambition, especially given her rights under the church discipline, and blamed most male opposition on "envy, jealousy and fear" of women's progress.<sup>30</sup> The *Bristol Ship* editor insisted that women had the right to engage in the same vocational pursuits as their husbands. When the husbands were absent, wives should be able to step in. When the husbands were present, wives had the right to be companions. "...[A]nd as long as you brethren let the women kill themselves working for the preachers, you ought not let fear of their surpassing you cause you to oppose their preaching, if they so desire . . ." Besides, opposition to the ordination was coming too late since "Sister Small is already ordained. Ha, ha, ha!"<sup>31</sup> By October 1898 the peak of controversial tension as reflected in newspaper debates had passed.

### Zion's Resolution and An Assessment of the Ordination Debate

The ordination of women to the ministry during these years faced tough opposition. It is surprising that the Zion engaged the issue as much as it did. The only authority that most Protestants

<sup>29</sup>*Star*, December 22, 1898, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup>Reprinted in *Star*, August 11, 1898, p. 1.

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

claimed was Scripture. To contradict the scriptures, in their opinion, was to call into question the very sovereignty of God. It would appear that no conclusive argument could have been made supporting the ordination of women without abandoning the traditional perspective that the Bible was the absolute, infallible Word of God. Just as there were passages that plainly portrayed women in roles of active leadership alongside and sometimes superior to men, there were also passages that clearly counseled women's subordination. No amount of contextual explanations, then or now, could render these passages so ineffectual as to provide an indisputable argument favoring women's ordination. To convince fully the traditionalists that women were eligible for *all* aspects of ministry, one would have to convince them to abandon some significant portions of their biblical traditionalism, a change that adherents on neither side of the debate were prepared to take. Even in the 1990s historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation do not meet with universal favor among the traditionally religious populace, Zionite or otherwise. It would seem that the proponents of women's ordinations in those days were doomed to defeat.

But appearances can prove deceptive. At the 1900 General Conference the Reverend A. J. Rogers introduced a resolution that apparently opposed the ordination of women. Five days later, a Saturday, May 19, when the matter finally came before the Conference for consideration, the effort to outlaw the ordination of women went down to defeat, a development that I suspect caught even the supporters of women ordination by surprise. The Conference minutes provide no breakdown on the voting; thus, we have no way of knowing whether the margin of victory for the progressives was small or large. It is noteworthy that four bishops, including Small, made qualifying statements after the defeat of the recommendation against ordination. In sum, the episcopal comments underscored that all women ordinations hitherto had been carried out in accordance with church laws, that the female candi-

dates had been fully qualified. Furthermore, no one should receive ordination to elder in the future unless she or he was fully qualified according to stated specifications of church law.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps these comments were made both to clarify the denomination's position on the issue of ordination of women and to calm dissent, division, or fear about the decision that the connection had just taken. To be sure, the Conference did not pass a resolution with a ringing endorsement of female ordination, and undoubtedly women would continue to face discrimination in their ministerial endeavors. Nevertheless, the progressives on gender had won a large victory. The denomination had finally and officially approved women's ordination to the orders of elder, consequently recognizing women's equality in all aspects of church work, and had done so while avoiding a major schism or continuous acrimonious debates over the issue.

There are other indications of the connection's move toward greater gender equity during this era. An observer of *The Star of Zion*, the denomination's most prominent newspaper, will find that during the 1890s women began to play more active roles in its pages. For example, Sarah Pettey, who initiated a "Woman's Column," drew attention to women personalities and issues in both the religious and secular realms. At least one daughter of Hood, Margaret Hood Banks, wrote occasional articles on women personalities in the Bible. There were also some prominent female evangelists, such as the Reverend Dr. Florence Randolph, who continued to have impressive influence in the church. Senior Bishop James Walker Hood and other progressives on women issues, in addition, promoted the cause of women's advancement in other areas of ecclesiastical life, including strong recommendations and support of women for certain key missionary offices in the church.

How do we account for the liberality of Hood, like-minded

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<sup>32</sup>Minutes, General Conference, AMEZ Church, 1900, pp. 56, 76.

Zion leaders, and the general connection to some extent regarding the ordination of women? First, there have been since the days of John Wesley some lay women preachers or missionaries in the various branches of Methodism: Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Methodist Protestant, and Union Church of African family. Though not officially designated elders, their ministerial tradition helped to accustom at least some Methodists, including Zionites, of the possibility that women could receive the call to preach. Second, the AMEZ, compared to some other Methodist groups, had always granted a greater degree of freedom to its lay membership. One might wonder if this liberality toward the laity in general did not also nurture, wittingly or unwittingly, a liberality toward women in particular.

Finally, the period between the years 1865 and 1920 was an exciting era of women's activity in public life, both in the secular and the ecclesiastical realms, a fact that probably encouraged liberality within some quarters of the Zion. We might think immediately of women leadership and endeavors in groups such as women's clubs, Women's Christian Temperance Union, the suffrage movement, and the development of women's organizations focusing upon missions and humanitarian and civil work. There was even a Methodist precedent for the ordination of women to eldership by the Methodist Protestant Church, as noted in the introduction of this article.<sup>33</sup> Zion's retains the distinction, however, as being the only major Methodist body recognizing complete gender equity within its membership.

### Conclusion

The foregoing historical account of the AMEZ tumultuous controversy over women's ordination has intrinsic value simply in

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<sup>33</sup>See Bucke, *American Methodism*, Volume II, pp. 405-406.

revealing a largely unknown and ignored aspect of African American and American religious history. In addition, this account illustrates two important points. First, Black Christians did not meekly and unimaginatively mimic or follow the lead of their White counterparts. Indeed, here is one situation or incident among many where Black Christians pioneered and they did so on an issue not wholly race specific. Second and more to the main point of the article, this issue of women's ordination reveals that, the uniqueness of the African American religious tradition notwithstanding, there are many issues, concerns, aspirations, and fears that transcend the color/ethnic/racial divide in American religion. Was this debate not in itself a capsule, case study of American religion in its struggle over gender equity — a struggle that many of us within the past ten to thirty years have witnessed in our respective denominations as well as in many of our own personal hearts, minds, and souls as we endeavored to move from yesterday to tomorrow? Do we not, thus, see the value of illuminating the broader picture that emerges from an inclusive/multicultural approach not only regarding religion, but all academic disciplines?