

from *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]* dedicated 'To the Saints and faithful Brethren in Christ, who have honoured my ministry with their attendance, in London and other localities of England' (London 1846)



Elaw Zilpha was born in 1790 near Philadelphia, to a freed black family, one of 22 children of whom only three survived childhood. When her mother died in childbirth, she went into service with a Quaker family, but having seen visions of Jesus joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1808; she married Joseph Elaw in 1810, moving the following year to Burlington, New Jersey, where she gave birth to a daughter. From 1817 she attended revivalist meetings, and began a ministry as an evangelist; her husband tried to stop her, fearing that she would be humiliated; he died in 1823. She and her daughter worked as domestics, and she opened a school for black children in Burlington. Soon after, she began an itinerant ministry, travelling through many states, especially those where slavery continued. In 1840 she believed that God was calling her to England, and she preached over 1,000 sermons in London and the Midlands. She planned to return to the USA in 1845, but may have died before this happened.

Having taken apartments in Well-close-square, in the evening I attended at the Countess of Huntingdon's chapel, in Pell-street, and heard a discourse which afforded some encouragement to the heart of a female stranger in a foreign land. Some days elapsed ere I met with any of the Methodist family, but, going on the Wednesday evening again to Pell-street chapel, as I was passing a window, I caught sight of a lady, whose appearance powerfully arrested my attention, and it appeared that the feeling of surprise and interest was mutual. I turned back, and spoke to her, and inquired if she was acquainted with any section of the Methodist body? She said that her daughter should on the following evening conduct me to the Wesleyan chapel of St. George, which she did accordingly; and I found that several class meetings were held on that evening; on that occasion, I met with Mr. A— who introduced me to Mr C— one of the local preachers; and I was admitted into the class led by him, and enjoyed a very sweet time of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. I became also acquainted with Mrs. I— a true sister in the Lord, who has since fallen asleep in Jesus: and was introduced to a gentleman who interested himself greatly on my behalf, very considerably enlarged the circle of my acquaintance, and even ushered me before the committees of the peace and anti-slavery societies. I found by situation rather awkward in reference to the latter body. I was first received by a deputation of three gentlemen, and afterwards admitted before the board. It was really an august assembly; their dignity appeared so redundant, that they scarcely knew what to do with it all. Had I attended there on a matter of life and death, I think I could scarcely have been more closely interrogated or more rigidly examined; from the reception I met with, my impression was, that they imagined I wanted some pecuniary or other help from them; for they treated me as the proud do the needy. In this, however, they were mistaken. Among many other questions, they demanded to be informed, whether I had any new doctrine to advance, that the English Christians are not in possession of? To which I replied, no; but I was sent to preach Christ, and Him crucified: unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness [1 Cor 1.23]: they also wished to be informed, how it came about that God should send me? to which I replied, that I could not tell; but I knew that God required me to come hither, and that I came in obedience to His sovereign will; but that the Almighty's design therein was best known to Himself; but behold! said I, "I am here." Pride and arrogance are among the master sins of rational beings; an high look, a stately bearing, and a proud heart, are abominations in the sight of God, and insure a woeful reverse in a future life. Infidels will indulge in pomposity and arrogance; but Christians are and must be humble and lowly. As a servant of Jesus, I am required to bear testimony in his name, who was meek and lowly, against the lofty looks of man, and the assumptions of such lordly authority and self-importance. Ere this work meets the eye of the public, I shall have sojourned in England five years: and I am justified in saying, that my God hath made my ministry a blessing to hundered of persons; and many who were living in sin and darkness before they saw my coloured face, have risen up to praise the Lord, for having sent me to preach His Gospel on the shores of Britain; numbers who had been reared to maturity, and were resident in localities plentifully furnished with places of worship and ministers of the gospel, and had scarcely heard a sermon in their lives, were attracted to hear the coloured female preacher; were inclosed in the gospel net, and are now walking in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. I have travelled in several parts of England, and I thank God He has given me some spiritual children in every place wherein I have laboured.

Soon after my arrival, I met with a gentleman, who advised my immediate return to my own country; adding that if he had been in America before my departure and had known my intention, he would have advised me better: I replied, that I had no will of my own in the matter; but my heavenly Father commanded, and I durst not confer with flesh and blood, but obeyed and came: but like other men destitute of faith in God, he did not comprehend this kind of argument; and persisted in his worldly reasonings, saying that people did not give away their gold here, and I had much better return. It is to be deplored that there are so many Christians of this person's case: who are of the world; speak in accordance with its principles and sentiments, and walk according to its course. Instead of having little faith, they discover none at all: ignorant of the Scriptures and of the power of God, the love of the Father is not in them. Having parted with this Laodicean gentleman, I called upon Mrs. H., in Princes-square: and my mind being somewhat damped, I sat a few minutes in silence, which Mrs. H. broke by an affectionate inquiry into my circumstances; at the same time, presenting me with a handsome donation...