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Quilting the Sermon: Homiletical Insights from Harriet Powers

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Abstract: Sermons come in a variety of forms. For Harriet Powers, an African American artist and former slave who lived from 1837–1910, sermons took the form of quilts. Unlike most quilts crafted during her lifetime, Powers’ quilts told biblical stories, recounted legends, and carried messages of divine judgement and hope. This article offers a brief account of her life, a description of her quilts, and a reflection on her spirituality. Rather than approaching her quilts solely as folk art, this essay places them in the African American preaching tradition.

Keywords: quilt; preach; sermon; voice; proclaim; Harriet Powers; African American women

Hidden off the side of a winding road in Athens, Georgia is Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery, a burial ground founded in 1882 by a small circle of African Americans who had been enslaved. Once a field, Gospel Pilgrim looks more like a forest now with mature trees and brush that spirals up sometimes knee high and sometimes waist-high, often thorny. The trees form a dense canopy for the roughly three thousand residents whose names and extraordinary feats of survival are mostly lost to us. But one of the great black preachers of the nineteenth century lies in Gospel Pilgrim. Her name is Harriet Powers. Driven by a deep and eclectic faith, she became an unusually gifted quilter and storyteller and made a significant contribution to homiletics that has been as veiled as her resting place.

Harriet Powers is known among folk artists and quilt historians for two quilts she crafted during the late nineteenth century. The first, *Bible Quilt*, completed around 1886, is currently held at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. The second, *Pictorial Quilt*, is dated 1895–1898 and forms part of the collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.¹ Both quilts demonstrate her remarkable prowess as a composer and seamstress. But Powers takes an unusual step by linking her quilting to preaching. She calls her first quilt “a Sermon in Patchwork” and shares an intention to “preach the gospel in patchwork, to show my Lord my humility . . . and to show where sin originated, out of the beginning of things.” (Perry 1994) Given this intention, Powers’ work offers unique insight into the content of late nineteenth century African American preaching and sheds light on the spirituality of an African American woman who did not rely exclusively on orality in her proclamation. While much of the literature on Powers centers on her skill as a quilter, this essay takes Powers at her word and explores her *Bible Quilt* as sermon discourse. After a brief biographical sketch, I will examine the content of the *Bible Quilt* and consider some of the homiletical implications.

1. Harriet Powers

Details on Powers’ early life are scant, but it is clear that she was born into slavery in Georgia on 29 October 1837. She married Armstead Powers in 1855 and, after emancipation, the couple made a home near Athens, Georgia where they owned a four-acre farm and had at least nine children. When Powers was not consumed with the farm or child-rearing, she worked as a seamstress and made

¹ There is some debate about the quilt’s dating. Powers may have commenced work on it prior to 1895 (Perry 1994).

quilts.² It is unclear whether Powers preached regularly in a church or whether she preferred quilting her sermons to transcend the confines of the pulpit ministry presented. Through quilting, she was able to share her faith in a predominantly female domain used for centuries by African American women to tell stories, testify, and fashion new selves out of experiences of fragmentation (Noel 2007, p. 77). Religious themes inspired Powers from the start and motivated her earliest known quilt, *The Lord's Supper*, in 1882.

Powers exhibited her *Bible Quilt* at the Athens Cotton Fair of 1886. While the quilt has muted tones today, back then it danced with vivid shades of pink, green, and orange. And more, the quilt had distinctive marks of African American craftwork, including contrasting sash trim, the placement of squares at most corners, and deliberate instances of asymmetry. Silhouettes of humans, animals, and celestial bodies were appliquéd in panels to depict distinct biblical stories and give them a universal quality.³ Powers' storytelling technique is curiously similar to that of the Fon people of Abomey, capital of the ancient Kingdom of Dahomey in West Africa, where appliquéd is used for ornamental costumes, wall hangings, and in tapestries that function as "living history books."⁴ Unlike typical quilts of her own era, Powers' quilt panels read horizontally rather than vertically. And, with dimensions of 75 inches by 89 inches, the quilt was clearly not intended for sleeping. The sizing and horizontal orientation suggest that it was intended for didactic purposes (Perry 1994). Powers also composed an accompanying interpretation for each panel (Fry [1990] 2002, p. 89).

The quilt's placement off in a corner of the exhibition hall did not stop it from wooing Jennie Smith, an artist and faculty member at Lucy Cobb Institute. Intrigued, Smith immediately sought out the quilter and soon learned that Powers was not interested in selling at any price (Fry 1976, p. 18). By 1891, circumstances had changed. In the grip of dire financial hardship, Powers offered to sell her quilt to Smith for ten dollars. Smith's counteroffer was five dollars, and Powers succumbed after her husband pressured her to accept it (ibid., p. 19). Yet, before parting with the quilt, Powers took pains to explain the interpretation of each panel to Smith.⁵ Powers also made several returns to visit the cherished quilt, prompting Smith to call it the "darling offspring of her brain."⁶

By the time Powers was 58, she was newly single, having separated from Armstead around 1895. She managed the household, farm, and finances as she saw fit—even mortgaging land in 1897 to buy herself a buggy for \$16.89 (ibid., p. 20). Sewing provided a critical income stream and drew black and white clients from the Athens region.

Still, Powers made time to quilt. By 1898, she had finished her *Pictorial Quilt* which was likely exhibited in the Nashville Exposition that year (Perry 1994). Like its predecessor, this quilt also had a vivid color scheme and incorporated orange, pink, red, green, and different shades of blue. Powers' design similarly combined contrasting sash trim, the placement of squares at many of the corners, and the use of asymmetry. Appliquéd silhouettes depict biblical narratives along with other stories Powers found compelling. At 60 × 105 inches, this quilt is larger than the first but similarly reads horizontally and clearly carries didactic intent. Whether this quilt was initially commissioned by the faculty wives of Atlanta University or first crafted for Powers' own purposes before being sold to them is unclear, but eventually the faculty wives gave the quilt to the chairman of their board of trustees, Rev. Charles Cuthbert Hall of New York.

While her second quilt was drawing admirers, Powers' own situation became increasingly tenuous. Weathered by financial difficulties, she sold many of her possessions and her net worth plummeted to

² Powers said she made five quilts but the whereabouts of three are unknown. One of the three missing quilts was made in 1882 and named "The Lord's Supper."

³ Aaron Douglas uses silhouettes in a similar way to depict universal themes (Earle 2007, p. 27).

⁴ (Fry [1990] 2002, p. 85). Marie Jeanne Adams also sees strong parallels between Powers' technique and the Dahomean technique but wants more historical evidence before concluding that the two are linked (Adams 1979).

⁵ (Fry [1990] 2002, p. 89). Smith later wrote an eighteen-page letter recounting Powers' descriptions and including her own amplifications. (Perry 1994).

⁶ (Fry 1976, p. 19). This quilt was donated to the Smithsonian after Smith's death in 1946.

around \$70 (Fry 1976, p. 20). She died on 1 January 1910, and her son, Marshall buried her in Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery next to Armstead. Her quilts continued to speak.

2. Powers' Sermonic Quilts

Powers' *Bible Quilt* consists of eleven panels that unfold like sermonic "moves," scenes that flow almost cinematically together to develop an overarching argument.⁷ She begins with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. An ostrich, camel, elephant, and leviathan surround Adam and Eve. Pride, symbolized by a dressmaker's form, sits between Eve and a massive serpent that threatens to overwhelm her. With its vivid stripes and orange feet, this serpent dominates the upper right corner of the panel. Eve occupies the center of the second panel as well but stands between Adam and her notorious son, Cain. Each family member is accompanied by an animal. Cain's is a rather flamboyant bird that may represent his conceit. The depictions become more ominous in panels three, four, and five. Satan triumphs among the seven stars, and an eerie stream of red blood depicts Cain murdering his brother, Abel. Exile follows, leaving Cain in the land of Nod. Powers uses this fifth panel on the reality of divine judgment to mark the nadir of her story and places this panel in the center of the quilt.

As if to assure the viewer, Powers' next two panels take a more hopeful turn. In the sixth panel, an angel descends Jacob's ladder and comes to earth. In the seventh panel, her first New Testament scene, the Holy Spirit descends on Christ. The enormity of Christ's redemptive work is vividly portrayed in her eighth panel which shows the Crucifixion. "Wipe it out in the world," Powers prayed while gazing at this panel, "Wipe it [sin] out in the world." (Perry 1994) Next, Powers turns to Judas' judgment and presence at the Last Supper. These panels seem to underscore the depth of Christ's betrayal and the magnitude of his redemptive work, though the sequencing is rather opaque. Yet, her final panel on the holy family clearly points back to her first panel, suggesting that the sin of Adam and Eve is redeemed through the birth of Christ.

Examined sermonically, the theme of sin and redemption readily emerges. Eight of her eleven panels warn the audience to guard against sin. The remaining three on redemption are positioned on the right side of the quilt and each of these three panels includes a figure that descends from the upper right corner. An angel descends in the Jacob's ladder panel, a dove representing the Holy Spirit descends at Jesus' baptism, and a large and intricate Bethlehem star descends in her final panel. In each case, these descending figures draw the viewer's eye up and to the right just as the striped serpent did in her first panel. Powers "is not so much interested in recounting a narrative as she is making a declaration of faith." (Adams 1979, p. 20) The quilt carries an argument about sin being eclipsed by the redemptive power of God.

"The Hand of God" might serve as a fitting name for Powers' *Pictorial Quilt*. She uses an image of a divine hand as a leitmotif and introduces it three times, once in each of her horizontal rows. The divine hand creates, guides, judges, and protects humans and animals. Yet, it is difficult to discern a definitive argument that unfolds horizontally in this quilt. Clearly, Powers is approaching her proclamatory task differently. She does not limit herself to biblical scenes. Instead, she lays biblical narratives alongside celestial phenomena and local legends (Fry [1990] 2002, p. 85).

When Powers draws on biblical stories in the *Pictorial Quilt*, she repeatedly depicts narratives in which God sends a sign that is either misunderstood or ignored. These include Job, whose suffering is misinterpreted by his friends, Moses, who lifts a serpent in the air in a move that foreshadows Christ's crucifixion, and Jonah, whose three days in the body of a whale prefigure Christ's three days in the tomb. Powers also alludes to Noah gathering two animals of every kind to go into the ark, another sign

⁷ (Buttrick 1987, p. 23). "Good preaching involves the imaging of ideas," Buttrick explains, "the shaping of every conceptual notion by metaphor and image and syntax." *Ibid.*, p. 27.

of impending judgement. Even the dove descending on Christ in the fifth panel indicates a heavenly sign that will be disregarded in Powers' final panel, the crucifixion.

Powers carries themes of impending judgement even when she turns away from biblical stories to climatological phenomena. For instance, her second panel depicts "The dark day of 19 May 1780," a day when mysteriously darkened skies covered much of New England and part of Canada.⁸ Many viewed the darkening of the sky as an omen. Since this event took place well before Powers was born, it is likely that she learned about it through oral history. Along this line, her eighth panel refers to 13 November 1833, a day when falling stars startled humans and animals and gave some people the impression that the world had come to an end. Her twelfth panel depicts the meteor shower that terrified humans and animals in the "red light night of 1846." (ibid., p. 91) A terrifying cold spell conveys divine judgement in a panel as well. Here, blue birds are killed and women and men freeze in the bitter weather. Powers' thirteenth panel is unique in that it does not include a direct reference to weather, stellar activity, or a biblical story. Instead, it portrays two moneyed Virginians, Bob and Kate Bell, "who were taught nothing of God." (Perry 1994) Little is known about the Bells and their connection to Powers, yet her central theme of judgement is as strong in this panel as the others.

There are, of course, other ways to interpret Powers' quilts. It has been suggested that each of Powers' panel constitutes a sermon and that the individual panels result from sermons she heard in church and memorized. Yet, the consistent theme and Powers' intentional sequencing suggest that the squares should be read as a unit. Considering the panels together, they warn of imminent divine judgment that will be initiated and tempered by the hand of God.

3. Homiletical Implications

Even if one can appreciate Powers' theological argument and artistry, it may be hard to see how her work fits within homiletical frameworks for what constitutes a sermon apart from Powers' description of her work as a "sermon in patchwork." (ibid.) She draws on a visual and tactile medium and pairs it with written interpretations of each panel but the aural component, generally deemed essential for sermonic discourse, is ancillary in her case. Some audiences may have received the benefit of her oral explanations while others simply relied on the images and design. Before minimizing Powers' use of "sermon" to describe her quilting, it is critical to note that she is not the first to describe visual art as sermonic. Wall paintings and other religious artwork were deemed "silent preaching" by medieval apologists (Gil 2002, p. 155; Wolf 1986, p. 57). Given that Powers received her religious formation in a Baptist setting rather than a Roman Catholic one, it is unlikely that Powers was building on these practices. Her approach seems to grow out of her own affinity for scripture, quilting, and ingenuity. She knows religious instruction and biblical interpretation take a range of forms. But more, quilting is a form of speech for Powers. Quilting functioned as a mode of speech for many enslaved African American women who arranged scraps of fabric to express themselves. A quilt might bear meaning that was personal to the quilter—a precious thing in itself—or carry a meaning for other members of her community.⁹

James A. Noel suggests that an interpretation of African American art requires a consideration of the artwork and "the creative act itself." (Noel 2007, p. 73) "Because of the extreme deprivation to which Africans were subjected during and subsequent to their arrival in the Americas, their artistic products required a tremendous feat on their part to muster and assert a humanity that was on the brink of annihilation." (ibid.) Powers' artistry emerges out of a menacing context. She designs her quilts during Reconstruction, a time when anti-black violence intensifies, male voices are privileged, and economic resources dwindle. Despite these conditions, Powers creates a symbolic universe that acknowledges the

⁸ The cause of the darkening is unclear but forest fires and pollution may have been factors (Fry [1990] 2002, p. 89).

⁹ While some historians question whether quilts were signaling devices on the Underground Railroad, Fry suggests quilts with the color black could have been used to indicate a safe house. (Fry [1990] 2002, p. 65).

harsh reality of her life but does not accept that reality as definitive (ibid., p. 77). Her quilting functions as the site of divine-human encounter and a means of affirming personhood (ibid.).

“Telling the story” is a fundamental aspect of African American preaching and Powers draws on elements of this tradition in her quilts. For example, when Powers gives Cain a pet peacock in her *Bible Quilt*, she engages in imaginative elaboration. When she places a dressmaker’s form in the Garden of Eden, she embraces the biblical story as if it were her personal story. And, by showing turtles swimming alongside the whale that will swallow Jonah in her *Pictorial Quilt*, Powers depicts a biblical scene as if it were an eye-witness account. Each of these narrative techniques is enumerated by Henry Mitchell as a distinguishing characteristic of Black preaching (Mitchell 1990, pp. 63–72). In addition, Powers’ quilts point to an omnipotent God who is aligned with the oppressed. This approach gives her a hermeneutical anchor in Black preaching, which despite variations in style and performance, tends to convey a message about an almighty God who sides with those who suffer (LaRue 2000, pp. 14–15).

Since Powers was illiterate for at least some portion of her adult life, it has been suggested that her sources included biblical narratives, oral histories, and sermons she heard in church (Fry [1990] 2002, p. 85). If this is the case, Powers’ quilting could also be understood as a means of extending the rhetorical space of the sermon. This idea is explored in contemporary homiletical theory. One scholar, Eunjo Mary Kim, argues that the sermon preached aloud in the context of worship is really a seed (Kim 1999, p. 13). Germination begins when the preacher has finished speaking and entrusted the message to the listeners who allow it to take root in their lives. Whether Powers’ sermonic quilts were conceived after hearing scripture alone, in response to the sermons of others, or some combination, she ultimately develops her own proclamatory intentions. She uses “visual testimony” to immerse viewers in stories and evoke an emotional response that stirs piety.¹⁰

There is another dimension of Powers’ homiletical strategy that situates her even more firmly within the African American preaching tradition. Rather than preaching a discursive message, she offers one that is “archaic,” or “predicated on the priority of something already there, something given.”¹¹ Her symbols and textures facilitate a process of “crawling back” to a deeper level of consciousness or evoking knowledge that is already within but encumbered (Long 1999, p. 9). Black preaching tends to draw out this knowledge rather than treat the sermon as a transactional endeavor in which the preacher deposits goods to the listeners.¹² Powers focuses on what her audience already knows by nurturing memory and offering faith-enlivening symbols that will embolden their Christian imagination.¹³

4. Powers’ Spirituality

A vibrant spirituality drives Powers’ preaching. She envisions God as a mighty sovereign who intervenes in earthly affairs and is known primarily through obedience to scripture and attentiveness to divine revelation. This revelation is not limited to scripture but continues to unfold in human history through climatological events, celestial occurrences, and everyday activities. Powers sees human beings as dependent creatures who are both vulnerable and resilient, prone to forget God’s providence but sustained by grace. She also views humans as susceptible to evil and in need of the spiritual guidance she offers.

In sharing her insight, she chooses a medium that is typically associated with domestic settings rather than liturgical ones, suggesting that she sees a role for proclamation outside the pulpit. One scholar, Maude Wahlman, goes as far as to suggest that Powers was a church mother, Masonic elder, or conjurewoman (Wahlman 2001, p. 65). The role of seer might just as easily be added to this list.

¹⁰ Aundrea L. Matthews says African American quilts carry “visual testimonies.” (Matthews 2015, p. 11).

¹¹ (Noel 2007, p. 75). Here, Noel draws Charles Long’s scholarship. (Long 1999, p. 52).

¹² (Crawford and Troeger 1995, pp. 39, 44). Harry Emerson Fosdick is a famous proponent of the more transactional approach. He envisions the preacher “delivering the goods” to the congregation. (Long 2004, p. 146).

¹³ Walter Brueggemann sees prophets as providing symbols that stir hope (Brueggemann 2001, p. 63).

Each of these roles is associated with expansive visions of divine revelation that take the preacher outside the confines of the pulpit.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Harriet Powers' spirituality concerns her fascination with stars. The first panel of her *Pictorial Quilt* features a well-known constellation, "Job's coffin," but if one steps back from the quilt and allows the panels to recede, it becomes clear that stars are as important as humans and animals in the quilt. They appear in all but one of her panels.¹⁴ With so many stars, the quilt resembles a sky map. She also uses an intricate technique when sewing the stars. Each one is sewn by hand from tiny bits of cloth that have been painstakingly cut into sharp triangles and set on a contrasting background (Adams 1979, p. 16). This extraordinary detail will not be lost on the viewer and may be even more evident to one touching the quilt. Powers' stars probably reflect elements of slave spirituality in which stars function as literal and metaphorical signs of hope. In her preaching, stars serve as divine witnesses to earthly events and signs of the spirit world.

Powers affinity for stars contributes to an eclectic spirituality in which nature, biblical stories, and recent history can be mined as sources of divine wisdom. While there is much about Powers' worldview that is unrecoverable, she seems to have had a holistic faith and a deep sense of unity with the environment. Her imaginative use of Black women's discourse suggests a proto womanist sensibility.

Retrieving nineteenth-century Black women's voices in preaching surely involves examining sermon manuscripts, written accounts, diaries, and letters. It also requires exploring other modes of discourse such as quilting. African American women's quilts are comparable to writing in that they hold a message in posterity. These messages are not recorded in words and ink on paper but in stitches and blood on fabric (Fry [1990] 2002, p. viii). In Powers' case, quilts carry the aesthetics, spirituality, and ethos of a Black woman who lived through the brutality of Reconstruction. Through the apparent silence of her needle, she found first a means of self-expression and delight, and later a vocation as a herald. Few are the preachers who can match Powers' skill in storytelling or capturing human imagination. Fewer still are the preachers who have played with the boundaries of the sermon genre in such a vibrant way. More than a century after her death, Powers' quilts provide a nexus for exploring such central themes in homiletics as hermeneutics, narrative design, intersectional identity, lay preaching and authority. When has a preacher accomplished so much while saying so little?

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¹⁴ The *Bible Quilt* also has a good number of stars. There are more than two dozen and they appear in seven of the ten panels.

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