

**ALL IN RAPTURES:  
THE SPIRITUALITY OF SARAH ANDERSON JONES**

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The counter-cultural beliefs and practices of early American Methodists carved a particular niche where women found spiritual freedom and opportunity for religious expression. During this grassroots period of American Methodism, women not only exhibited spiritual authority and participated in ecclesiastical leadership, but were also engaged in a form of ascetic mystical piety not unlike the piety of earlier periods in Christian history. Sarah Anderson Jones of Virginia (1753-1794), is one such Methodist woman whose writings, both published and unpublished, reveal something of the spiritual discipline and theological framework of early American Methodists. Her journal and letters offer insight into the experience of Methodist women who discovered liberation from an otherwise highly patriarchal culture in southern America. Sarah Jones' writings are reflective, in the most extreme sense, of the passionate and erotic expression of Methodism's experiential religion. Indeed, Sarah Anderson Jones is quite possibly the quintessence of early American Methodist spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, Sarah Jones has been content to remain among the nameless women in Methodist history who, according to John Wigger, nonetheless "formed the backbone of American Methodism."<sup>2</sup> Her published letters and repeated mention in the letters and journals of Methodist preachers, including Francis Asbury, did, however, capture the attention of Cynthia

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<sup>1</sup> Lester Ruth, *The Spirituality and Life of Early Methodists: A Reader* (Nashville: Kingswood, forthcoming), characterizes Sarah Jones as "the embodiment of Methodist spirituality," and "so quintessentially Methodist—that she was beyond the experience of most." I am indebted to Dr. Ruth for introducing me to Sarah Jones, and guiding the research and writing of this article.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 168.

Lyerly, scholar and professor of American women's and southern history.<sup>3</sup> Lyerly names Sarah Anderson Jones as "one of the most influential southern Methodist women" and "the most remarkable white woman of the southern church."<sup>4</sup> Upon investigation of such claims, it is clear that Mrs. Sarah Anderson Jones was not only one of the most highly connected and influential of southern Methodists women, but also that her prose and poetry reveal her to be a gifted conveyor of the mystical religious experience that often accompanies extreme ascetic piety.<sup>5</sup> Her writing gives voice to the intense emotion that characterized the experiential religion of the early Methodists, though Ms. Jones, herself, acknowledged the inadequacy of even angelic language to capture her passion, as demonstrated in the following stanza of a hymn attributed to her authorship.

All human expressions are empty and vain.  
They cannot unriddle the heavenly flame!  
I'm sure if the tongue of an angel I had,  
I could not the myst'ry completely describe.<sup>6</sup>

### Sarah Anderson Jones: Background and Context

Sarah Jones' pen records the struggles of her own spiritual journey, but also gives expression to the spiritual and physical labor of a religious movement that gave birth to the most successful Protestant denomination in post-revolutionary America. A contemporary of Catherine Livingston Garrettson, whose own mystical writings have given tremendous insight into the charac-

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to Francis Asbury, Sarah Jones corresponded with such notorious Methodists as William McKendree, James O'Kelly and Edward Dromgoole and many others. See Jeremiah Minter, ed., *Devout Letters or, Letters Spiritual and Friendly. Written by Sarah Anderson Jones* (Alexandria: Samuel Snowden, 1804). Letters to Dromgoole are found in the Edward Dromgoole Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, NC. For journal excerpts from some of the other Methodist itinerants who knew Ms. Jones, see Cynthia Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 98, 103, 104, 110, 212.

<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Lyerly, "Passion, Desire, and Ecstasy: The Experiential Religion of Southern Methodist Women, 1770-1810" in *The Devil's Lane, Sex and Race in the Early South*, Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie, eds. (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 174 and Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 109. Sarah Anderson Jones is also cited in Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Such extreme ascetic practices are echoes of mystical expression found in earlier period of Christian history. See Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 294-296.

<sup>6</sup> This hymn is found in two different early collections of hymns, "Spiritual Songs," ms., Edward Dromgoole Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, NC and Richard Allen, *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns, selected from various Authors* (Philadelphia: John Ormrod, 1801), 4-5. The attribution of authorship to Sarah Jones is made by the editor of the reprint edition of Allen's hymnal, *A Collection of Spiritual Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Philadelphia: T.L. Plowman, 1801; reprint, Nashville: A.M.E.C. Sunday School Union, 1987), 115.

ter of feminine spirituality and the role of women in early Methodism in the northern region (NYC), Sarah Jones, who was born and died in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, offers a view from the southern region, which was characterized as “a hotbed of Methodists activity” during the last quarter of the 1700’s.<sup>7</sup> This “hotbed” was likely ignited in late 1775 and 1776 when a revival “as great as perhaps ever was known” began almost consecutively in three places in Virginia.<sup>8</sup> It is quite likely that Sarah’s conversion occurred during one of these first Methodist revivals that broke out in the southern Virginia region when Sarah was about 23 years of age.<sup>9</sup> Sarah Anderson Jones would have been among the first American Methodist converts in a region that exploded with religious fervor that spread like wildfire. In fact, by the year 1777, the state of Virginia was home to almost half of the 7000 Methodists in all of America,<sup>10</sup> and by the year 1800, 13 out of the 17 presiding elders of the Methodist conference were from the southern region.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of this region and its influence upon the whole of American Methodism is the subject of Russell Richey’s essay, “The Formation of American Methodism: The Chesapeake Refraction of Wesleyanism.” In this pointed essay, Richey claims that traditional Methodist history has overlooked the significant regional contribution that the Chesapeake region made to the American Methodist movement. Here, in this region, was potent Methodism—a densely concentrated source that would supply a significant number of lethally empowered leaders who would carry Methodism with its *Chesapeake coloration* westward across America.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Ms. Jones’ writings provide a venue into Methodist spirituality at a crucial place and time that branded the character of American Methodism. The flames of Methodism that melted the first of its American souls, including Sarah Anderson Jones, ignited passions that would help spread Methodism to “New Virginia,” that is Ohio, and points west, so labeled because of its fertile receptivity to Methodism that replicated the Chesapeake area.

### The Spirituality of Sarah Anderson Jones

Sarah Anderson Jones spirituality is deeply mystical in its form and in-

<sup>7</sup> Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 25, footnote 16, characterizes Devereux Jarratt’s description found in *A Brief Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Virginia in a letter to a Friend*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: J. Paramore, 1786).

<sup>8</sup> Devereux Jarratt, *Brief Narrative*, 6-10.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, vii. In the preface, Minter estimates Mrs. Jones “spiritual race” at “about eighteen years” and gives the year of her death as 1794. Therefore, her conversion would likely be around 1776 (age 23), the same year as the revivals in southern Virginia.

<sup>10</sup> Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 61, citing *The Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1795), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Russell Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 53.

<sup>12</sup> Richey Russell, “The Formation of American Methodism: The Chesapeake Refraction of Wesleyanism,” in *Methodism and The Shaping of American Culture*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 203-206.

tensely erotic in its expression. Her life seems totally consumed by her rigorous piety that sustains her in her quest for union with Christ. In the throws of ecstasy, her emotions run rampant and her pen can hardly keep pace with her passionate discourse of love. She was a well-educated woman whose spiritual journey led her to places of rapture where she most nearly escaped the confines of her earthly existence. At times, it seems as if her physical body was all that kept her tethered to the earth. She continually sought to subdue her flesh through extreme ascetic practices, including long periods of fasting and sleep deprivation. Such practices combined with her vivid imagination provided the fuel for her frequent and quite intense spiritual experiences that were characterized by extremely emotional and physical responses.

... his (Jesus') beauty and glory hath almost killed me this day as well as for several of late. Oh could I, Oh could I let my heart be seen? Oh believe me, my love to Jesus and his burning flaming nearness truly keeps my feeble trembling body on the bounds of eternity. I can just bear the unsufferable weight of crushing glory. I am chained and fettered with love.<sup>13</sup>

Sarah Jones describes her experiences with striking images and provocative metaphors. She feels “daggers” or even “ten thousand bullets” in her heart as she is taken up in a frenzy of passion and ecstasy.<sup>14</sup> There is hardly a letter or diary entry that does not mention her tears flowing like streams. Her “soul trembles as the needle beneath the load stone.”<sup>15</sup> She spends much time meditating in the piney woods of Virginia, which inspires eloquent prose that captures the splendor of God’s creation, aptly illustrated in the following excerpt from her diary.

Sun set I walked in deep reflection afar as in the closing hour of day, around was curtained with a sober grey. Nature in silence bid the world repose while near my path a mantling tower arose. Sweet platting pines tangling in solemn beauty, the silver queen of night piercing her shining beams in checkers on the ground.<sup>16</sup>

Scenes of such vivid beauty might escape the notice of most, but the mystic’s soul is keenly in tune with God’s presence even in the most mundane settings and cannot help but burst forth in praise of God’s magnificent handiwork.

Similar to the idiom of Catherine Livingston Garretson, Sarah Jones engages a language of love to describe her relationship with Christ. However, Sarah is more explicitly erotic as she describes the deeply intimate moments with Christ that manifested during her ecstatic experiences. Not surpris-

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Anderson Jones, *Diary, 1792-1793*, ms., Manuscript and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA, 6 March 1792. Punctuation has been added to this and subsequent excerpts of Ms. Jones’ diary to assist in contemporary comprehension. Spellings have not been corrected and are therefore as they appear in the original diary.

<sup>14</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 57; Jones, *Diary* 7 March 1792. These and similar metaphors occur repeatedly in her letters and diary describing the onset of an ecstatic experience.

<sup>15</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *Diary*, 5 March 1792.

ingly, one of her favorite books of the Bible is the Song of Solomon. During one interval of ecstasy, she was “so full of dying love” that she wrote almost the entire song in her journal, which was “a great blessing” that subsequently made the Devil mad.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes, she describes herself as a child with Christ, “a weaned child in the nursery of Angels, in the arms of Jesus” or even imagines herself and her prayer partner nursing together at Jesus’ breasts, “both spirits on Jesu’s breast as twins, swallowing the streams of Love.”<sup>18</sup> At other times she is the lover who receives the affection of the beloved. In the following passage, the language and images from Song of Solomon give verse to her experience during her morning prayer.

I arose up this morning to open the door to my beloved and my hands dropped with myrrh and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh upon the handles of the lock. I opened to my beloved and he was not gone. But [he] smiled with beauty. His cheeks were as bows of jewels. His neck with chains of gold appeared while solidly charmed I sprang into his arms and his Name poured out as ointment and his lips dropped as the honeycomb. Honey and milk was under his tongue and the smell of his garments were as the flowery field. I felt my body made his temple and springing wonders rooll [roll] anew.<sup>19</sup>

While this passage is infused with phrases taken directly from Song of Solomon, notice the critical difference. In Scripture, the lover opens the door to find that her “beloved had turned and was gone.”<sup>20</sup> In Sarah’s experience, her beloved “is not gone” but instead avails himself to her and she finds herself in the sensual embrace of intimate lovers. She is so overtaken by Christ’s love that she exclaims, “Sometimes I feel like my breath would cease in his embraces,” and “His eyes that are so fitly set, hath left an arrow in my heart.”<sup>21</sup>

On another occasion of morning prayer, Sarah describes the “soft and lily hands” of Jesus as she “as sensibly, through faith, handled the sacred touch” and “leaned on his bosom till streams of tears answered in witness.”<sup>22</sup> Intense emotional outbursts were part of the early Methodists experience, though not many recorded events can match the erotic intensity of Sarah Jones. Her “erotic spirituality” may be characterized as “a more intense form of something inherent in Methodist piety,” but intense devotion and affection for Christ “was the common inheritance of all early Methodists.”<sup>23</sup>

Sarah Jones spiritual journey, so vividly described in her letters and journal, illustrates the characteristically Wesleyan emphasis on Christian perfection. Like many of her covenant brothers and sisters, she was in constant

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<sup>17</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 34. The image of Christ as a nursing mother can be found as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century in the writings of church fathers. See Carolyn Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *Diary*, 5 July 1792.

<sup>20</sup> Song of Solomon 5:6.

<sup>21</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Lester Ruth, *Spirituality and Life of Early Methodists*.

pursuit of holiness, always seeking a deeper and more intimate relationship with God. “I want to enter a new degree of religion; and more I must have if it is to be attained. . . . All my soul is reaching, my poor frame is trembling, my heart is gone out after more of God.”<sup>24</sup> Never content with her current spiritual condition, she pushed the limits of her ascetic practices in order to reach new levels of sanctification and plunge into even greater depths of ecstasy. The deeply intimate encounters she experienced in rapture aroused her insatiable desire for more of Christ: “The more I drink, the more I thirst, and it causes the lips of those who are asleep to speak; and it so inspires my tongue the Devil has no chance of argument, while I drink freely.”<sup>25</sup> She is a woman with a singular obsession—Jesus Christ, her Lord and Lover, and will not rest until she has obtained her soul’s desire by departing from her earthly body to join Him forever in heaven.

Sarah Anderson Jones’ religious expression was not limited to her written word—she was also a powerful and effective speaker. While very few women were officially preachers, women were called upon to “exhort” and pray, following the sermon. These exhortations and prayers could go on for hours during worship, evoking a variety of emotional responses from hearers. Sarah Jones was often called upon to exhort and pray at quarterly and class meetings and was highly praised for her skills. In March of 1786, Asbury notes the effects of her speaking.

We had a gracious time at quarterly meeting, especially at the sacrament: The words of our excellent Sister Jones, both in speaking and in prayer were sweetly and powerfully felt. The second day was great, both in preaching and love feast: my soul was melted: I have not witnessed such a meeting in the South.<sup>26</sup>

Sarah describes a similar occasion, where her speaking melted souls: “In the misery with the grandeur of many of them I was called on to pray, and O, God stept in me; and they universally melted. . . .”<sup>27</sup>

Sarah hinted at her own desire to preach in one of her letters: “If my vessel is smallest, and not made to be so honorable as to preach the ever-blessed Gospel, if I keep my vessel clean, full and running over, that will do.”<sup>28</sup> Her words give evidence of the limitation that deterred many gifted women from pursuing the call to preach. Such imposed restraint ignited internal struggles that are apparent in the writings of several women of this early period. For example, Catherine Garrettson expressed her despair as she struggled to accept this restriction: “What can I do equal to the service you are engaged in—what more noble employment, than bringing souls to Christ. . . if you

<sup>24</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Francis Asbury, March 1786 in *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, eds., Elmer T. Clark, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 1:510-511.

<sup>27</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 24.

only knew how painfully I feel my own insignificance, you would pity me.<sup>29</sup> Notice that both women describe preaching in admirable terms (*honorable, noble*) and infer that they are resigned to serve Christ in a lesser capacity. The impassioned writing of both of these women likely served as an alternate emotional release for the intense love that stirred in them a desire to serve God in ways that were, with some exception, prohibited.

In spite of the informal restriction in these formative years, women would not allow the absence of a preacher to be cause for lost souls. On one occasion, when the scheduled preacher did not arrive, Sarah Jones took the opportunity to step into the role of preacher and was notably effective at swaying converts. She commented quite matter-of-factly in the postscript of letter to one of the circuit riders with whom she regularly corresponded: "God gave me a convert yesterday at the Tabernacle. It was brother George's appointment, but he was not there."<sup>30</sup> She notes another occasion in 1792, when, although she was physically weak, she was able to speak powerfully at a quarterly meeting. "I have been much blessed of late at meeting, altho' so weak, I could hardly live; yet Hell stooped before me, while I have seen God's power in declaring Christ amid hundreds; some have been lately converted, I hope, with me; and others cut through."<sup>31</sup> Like other female leaders of the Methodist movement, she did not let her gender prevent her from filling whatever role was necessary to bring lost souls to Christ.

A more acceptable role for spiritually devout women during this grass-roots period of Methodism was that of a "mother in Israel," upon whom the itinerant preachers greatly depended. These mothers of the movement served in one dimension as a kind of pastor, tending to the spiritual needs of the Methodist community, visiting the sick in body and soul. In another dimension, they saw to the material needs of the traveling ministers, mending clothes, providing room and board and even protecting them from angry mobs. Thirdly, they attended to the pastors' spiritual needs, offering spiritual advice, exhortation, encouragement and intercessory prayer as "surrogate sisters and mothers."<sup>32</sup> It was this third dimension that consumed Sarah's life. Identified as a "*nursing* mother in Israel" by her closest clergy correspondent,<sup>33</sup> her life was consumed by prayer, hour upon hour of journaling and writing letters to encourage, exhort and exchange spiritual struggles and triumphs with her Christian brothers and sisters, including several Methodist clergy. She was a dedicated prayer-warrior on her own behalf, on behalf of the lives of several Methodist itinerant preachers and for the sake of the

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<sup>29</sup> Catherine Garrettson, Letter to Freeborn Garrettson, 10 January 1791, in Diane Lobody, *Lost in the Ocean of Love: The Mystical Writings of Catherine Livingston Garrettson* (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1990), 125.

<sup>30</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 130-131.

<sup>32</sup> John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 160. Wigger's chapter entitled "Sisters and Mothers in Israel" offers numerous specific examples of women role's during early Methodism.

<sup>33</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 27.

kingdom of God.

Growing up amidst the battles of a country fighting for its freedom, Sarah surely had a context for understanding warfare and she often used military language to describe the daily struggles of spiritual life.

What brings honour? Daily conquest; hard fighting, and victory every battle. . . The great assurance we have of the heavy reward if we conquer, and a sudden remembrance of the unutterable joys we do receive if we stand fire.—What gives us courage? A good conscience, daring insults from Hell, weary marches, hot battles and powerful combats. This, and victory, always inures us to endure hardship as good soldiers.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps she ascertained that the real battles for freedom were fought in the spiritual dimension rather than the physical one. In one journal entry, she exclaims: “I fell (feel) arm’d, this morning for battle. Equiped for war! What is the strong weapon? Love with all the Glories of heaven and fullness of the Ocean rooling around me.”<sup>35</sup> In the battle for the kingdom of God and in response to the Methodist calling to “spread Scriptural holiness” Sarah fought on the front lines—on her knees and on her face—most times in seclusion either in an upper room or in the surrounding woods to which she would escape to pray, even in the cold of winter and the dead of night.

Early Methodists were known for their rigorous piety and their determination to separate themselves from worldly wiles, in thought and action.<sup>36</sup> Sarah prescribed to a strict ascetic lifestyle that included prolonged fasting, sleep deprivation and other practices of self-denial and mortification meant to conquer the flesh and plunge one into fits of ecstatic rapture.<sup>37</sup> To sleep would be giving into the needs of the flesh and took precious time away from her interludes with Christ. Her prose and poetry speaks of her longing for physical death so that she could be with Jesus:

O could I lean my weary head  
In this sweet place and dy  
On Jesus breast my dying bed  
And silently comply.<sup>38</sup>

In turn, she kept watch for Christ’s return, expressing a strong eschatological hope, feeling upon herself the burden for the church greatly in need of her Savior:

May I challenge time, that holds me and my beloved Jesus asunder, and cry unto

<sup>34</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, Diary, 11 June 1792.

<sup>36</sup> Cynthia Lyerly rightly notes that Methodist asceticism is characterized not only outwardly by abstaining from various cultural activities such as dancing, drinking and gambling, but also by inward cleansing from “all impure thoughts and desires” (*Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 39-40).

<sup>37</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 9, 13, and see especially her letter boasting to Minter, “O how high my victory over sleep,” 75.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, Diary, 12 August 1792. See also Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 23, 34, 39.

him, come over the mountains at one stride, and fold up the heavens like an old cloak, and shovel times, days and months out of the way, and make ready in haste the Lamb's wife, for his absence from his church here is as a mountain of iron upon my breast.<sup>39</sup>

Sarah Anderson Jones spent almost all hours of the day in some form of spiritual discipline, especially in solitary prayer and writing sessions that could be six or even twelve hours in length, as well as extended prayer sessions with others. She read Wesley's writings and called his *Notes* her favorite book, quoting him often in her letters.<sup>40</sup> Sarah believed that there was nothing more important to the Christian life than prayer—it was essential to avoid falling into temptation, thus losing one's salvation. "I have spent this day with God, and he has as sensibly answered my prayers as I know I am alive. Ah, Lord, how easy should I go to Hell was I to leave off watching and prayer! I wonder how some professors live with so little prayer. O what would I do could I persuade them to pray more."<sup>41</sup> Her concern is not directed at nominal Christians, but to her own spiritual partners who are mature in faith and the practice of spiritual disciplines. In a letter to Jeremiah Minter, she exhorts him to "pray without ceasing" as the way to heaven is lost "if we only yield to one sinful thought. . . ."<sup>42</sup> In another letter to William Spencer, a Methodist clergyman and her "very dear brother," she encourages him not to listen to those who say such extensive use of the means of grace is to "boast of works," and suggests that those who "cannot endure sound doctrine of self denial and constant wrestling" are "poor precious blinded professors."<sup>43</sup> Her anxious concern of the souls of Christians who by neglecting prayer may lose their salvation is characteristic of the Wesleyan emphasis upon the progressive nature of Christian perfection, which requires a proactive faith and divine grace. Describing the difficult work of sanctification, she exclaims, "How great a thing it is to get the heart, by dint of practice, to stream upward; against nature indeed: and none but supernatural assistance can effect the strange work. Good heavens! How hard, how rare, how great, how profitable, how Heavenly, how desirable it is. And O, all hail, it can be attained!"<sup>44</sup>

Given her near fanatical ascetic lifestyle, it is not surprising that she died at the young age of 41 in 1794, after suffering several years from an unnamed illness. Francis Asbury recorded the following in his journal after performing her funeral:

Dear sister Jones is gone to rest, after two years of deep affliction. She has had a painful journey through life; but her persecutions and troubles are now at an end

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<sup>39</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 39-40.

<sup>40</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 70.

<sup>41</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 21, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 107.

and heaven will compensate for all. She made choice of Job iii. 17<sup>45</sup> for her funeral text; and with great deliberation disposed of her property. I preached her funeral on Friday, 12<sup>th</sup>, and found it a serious day to me. I never saw her more than twice or thrice, and we have interchanged a few letters. She was doubtless a woman of sense, vivacity and grace. She wrote to admiration—all in raptures. She would pray in any place, and before any people; she reproved with pointed severity, and sung with great sweetness.<sup>46</sup>

### Jones' Earthly Affairs and Concerns

The troubles and persecution of which Asbury speaks likely began with her decision to unite with the Methodists. Like other wives of this period whose spouses did not join them in their Methodist conversion, she was subjected to the wrath of her husband who did not approve of her religious affiliation with the Methodists. Faced with a warning at gunpoint from her husband, Tignal, that was meant to convince her of the seriousness of his previous threats, "Sarah was resolute and 'accosted him mildly' by saying 'My dear, if you take my life, you must obtain leave from my heavenly Spouse.'"<sup>47</sup> Husbands and fathers, who were accustomed to positions of supreme authority over all members of their households—wives, children and slaves—could not deter their subjects from serving a higher Master, who took persecution and suffering as a confirmation of their salvation. Thus, Methodism threatened to disrupt the established patriarchal family and white, male dominated community structure that so flavored the South. Accounts of husbands and fathers using physical force to remove their women from Methodist meetings give testimony that the gentry of the South intended to preserve their honor and maintain a tight reign as master of his household. Some wives and daughters were subject to threats and physical abuse, as were the Methodists clergy who encouraged these women to disobey their fathers and husbands.<sup>48</sup> Over time, as Methodism matured from an emotionally charged movement to a more somber institution, male domination succeeded in limiting the formal power of women. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, church legislation prohibited and limited the formal power of women and blacks and men increasingly replaced women as class leaders.<sup>49</sup>

Sarah Jones was of like mind with other early Methodists who recognized the equality of all persons in the eyes of God and called for the eradication

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<sup>45</sup> There the wicked cease from turmoil, and there the weary are at rest (NIV).

<sup>46</sup> Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, II:34.

<sup>47</sup> Cynthia Lyerly, "Passion, Desire and Ecstasy," 177, describes this confrontation documented by Thomas Ware, "Sketches of the Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware," in William R. Phinney et al., eds., *Thomas Ware, a Spectator at the Christmas Conference* (Rutland: Academy Books, 1984), 168-169.

<sup>48</sup> See Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), especially chapter 4, "Mothers and Others in Israel" and Cynthia Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, Chapter 5, "Mothers in Israel." Both authors cite stories found in journals of early Methodists, especially clergy.

<sup>49</sup> Christine Heyrman, 168 and Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 118-119.

of all slavery. Emancipation, however, threatened to completely shatter the societal and economic structure of the south and put an end to the wealth of plantation owners that depended heavily upon slave labor. The southern resistance to the emancipation of slaves stirred Sarah's soul to offer prophetic pleas in her writing, and quite likely in her spoken exhortations as well. "Bend O nations, bow O Virginia, loose the captives, let the mangled objects go, or my sword shall wreak your bowels, and be drunk with my fury": Sarah foresaw that God's intervention on behalf of the "mangled objects" would issue in a consequence of violence.<sup>50</sup>

She, like other Methodist women whose husbands owned slaves and would not be swayed to set them free, found themselves in an ethical predicament as they continued to supervise their household slaves over whom they themselves had no authority to set free. Sarah's husband owned over 70 slaves and although he did eventually become Methodist, his conversion, like those of the majority of southern slave-owners, did not include the change of heart that motivated the emancipation of his slaves.<sup>51</sup> Sarah wrestled internally with this predicament and in one of her letters she confided: "God knowing my inmost mind would say amen, to loose poor negros, but I am bound and must go on beneath it. Pray for me. How can Christians be saved that are clouded in Ethiopes blood. It rings in my soul day and night."<sup>52</sup> Sarah questions the eternal salvation of professed believers who were still stained with the guilt blood of slaves whom they refused to set free. She struggled too, with her own participation in this sinful oppression, trusting that God knew her heart's desire and could see that her own hands were tied. Repeatedly, her self-examination led her to wrestle with her own responsibility: "I will try to watch every moment, I will beg in dust for humility, I will cry for charity. Although the oppressed stare me through, I will try to be clear of their blood. My witness is in Heaven, my record is on high; and I will try to live in everlasting fire."<sup>53</sup>

There is irony in Ms. Jones' desire to see the slaves set free. If she could not rely on slaves to tend to household chores and attend to the needs of her children, she would likely be unable to spend such long hours at prayer, fasting, journaling and letter writing. To some measure, it is slavery that afforded her the freedom to engage in the extremely ascetic lifestyle she desired. Nevertheless, the issues that complicated the emancipation of slavery left many Methodist clergy and laity with a drastic tension between their personal and social ethic that took years to work itself out.

Sarah's extreme devotion to Christ and almost constant practice of spiritual disciplines left her little time or concern for other earthly matters—her mind and soul were set on things above. She could not endure distractions that kept her from her spiritual race for Jesus: "I visit scarce at all, only the

<sup>50</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 7.

sick, and when necessary business calls. Oh, how much sweet time many loose in visits. O how insipid! My task is refined, I can't swallow the dirt of vain talking."<sup>54</sup> Because her focus is almost entirely upon spiritual matters and her conversation of spiritual concerns, there is little to glean from her writings about the character of her marriage or her relationship with her children. She had at least three children, whom she only mentions briefly in her letters and journal, of which she primarily speaks concern for their spiritual well being.<sup>55</sup> She does, however, write of a conflict between Mr. Jones and herself, concerning her children's manner of dress that causes her to suffer much grief from other Methodists in the community. A measure of one's level of piety was demonstrated by the willingness to separate from earthly things. In so doing, Methodists denounced the finery and elaborate dress of the wealthy and instead chose to dress plainly, without adornment. Not only was this an expression of individual and communal piety, but it also "diminished the distance between members of different classes."<sup>56</sup> Sarah, who "abhor[red] dress and fashion, more than necessary decency" desired this same symbolic detachment for her children, but "Mr. Jones is my head . . . and he positively commands my children dress as others do."<sup>57</sup> Thus, Sarah was free to express her own piety, but bound by the patriarchal family structure to abide by her husbands wishes concerning her children.

Sarah Anderson Jones, like many seriously devoted Methodists, corresponded through letters and in person with numerous Methodist preachers, her brothers in Christ, as well as several other Methodist sisters with whom she shared spiritual kinship.<sup>58</sup> She covenanted with at least one of her spiritual brothers to meet in prayer at ten o'clock each night, regardless of the geographic distance between them.<sup>59</sup> She corresponded with and frequently mentioned Brother James O'Kelly,<sup>60</sup> who was her neighbor and friend. In a letter to Mrs. Mary Easter she expressed her concern over the schism saying "war and woe is in our church."<sup>61</sup> Rev. James Meacham wrote in his journal of a conversation with "Sister S. J." about sanctification and notes that the following day, "Sister Jones" and "Old Bro. Easters" accompanied him

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<sup>54</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> For example, Her son, "Francis" attended school away from home. In a letter to William Spencer, she requests, "If you see my son Francis, now at College, love him for me, and talk to him about his precious soul." Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 131. See also the entry in her diary for 1 September 1792.

<sup>56</sup> Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 88.

<sup>58</sup> Letter-writing as a means of fellowship and networking was a common practice of early Methodists. See John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 168.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah takes this covenant seriously, mentioning it several times in her letters and even abruptly dismissed herself from a gathering that included other Methodist clergy, to meet him in prayer. See her letter to Jeremiah Minter in Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 51.

<sup>60</sup> James O'Kelly opposed the measure of power afforded to the Methodist episcopacy and thus led the first departure from the Methodist Church, so named the O'Kelly Schism. See Fredrick Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 127-129.

<sup>61</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 153.

to his next stop on the circuit.<sup>62</sup> Correspondents included George Enoch, Pemberton Smith, William McKendree, among other Methodist clergy and Christian sisters such as Nancy Smith and Sally Eastland.<sup>63</sup> Numerous other names of the well known and unknown saints of early Methodism are preserved in the letters and diary of Sister Sarah Anderson Jones, whose recording of events in the Methodist community and in her own life paint an astounding picture of the beginnings of Methodism in America.

Her closest friend and spiritual brother was Jeremiah Minter, who is responsible for the publication of a collection of her letters, and possibly a biography of Sarah Jones.<sup>64</sup> Minter was quite an unusual character and the subject of much controversy on his own, which no doubt added to rumors and accusations already afloat about Sarah's relationship with Minter.<sup>65</sup> The language of one's spiritual journey at the time was commonly couched in terms of a race in which one moved forward clothed in piety and fueled by unceasing prayer. In her correspondence with Jeremiah Minter, it is clear that they are in competition with one another in their race to Jesus, and such competition motivates each to keep in fast pursuit of the prize that is Christ Jesus (Phil 3:14). The following passage contains evidence of this competition, but it is also telling of Sarah Jones' deep understanding of the distorted God image in humanity and the source of original sin.

How can I bear you to love my dear Jesus best. I know we are related by our dear father's side; but O my mother, my ugly mother was earthly, and I was so hard to wean, and have eaten so much dirt, it has made me short-sighted, and too much like Thomas, it has constricted me a dwarf, but I have drunken abundance of wormwood for its cure, and I think I begin to grow a little. But O for as much perfection as God can give me.<sup>66</sup>

In these few lines, she seems not only to speak of her own journey, but could also easily be speaking for the journey of humanity through creation, the fall and the arduous and slow trip back to God. The imagery is brilliantly captivating and illustrates her depth of theological understanding.

Indeed, it is understandable that the relationship between Minter and Jones was under scrutiny, as a mere cursory reading of just a sampling of their correspondence would likely raise a few eyebrows. She opens one letter to Minter provocatively, "O my Holy Brother, Let me not weary thee; my heart is enlarged and my mouth opened unto you," and on another occasion

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<sup>62</sup> William K. Boyd, "A Journal and Travel of James Meacham," ed. William K. Boyd, *Annual Publication of Historical Papers at The Historical Society of Trinity College*, 10, (1914), 87.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Jones, *Devout Letters*, ed., Jeremiah Minter.

<sup>64</sup> Minter makes reference to this biography in the preface to *Devout Letters*, but, to my knowledge, it has not yet been located.

<sup>65</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 49. Minter gives testimony to his "excommunication" from the Methodist Conference because of his literal interpretation of Matthew 19:12 that led him to have himself surgically castrated in order to become a eunuch for the kingdom.

<sup>66</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 43.

she comments that their “union in Jesus is more like paradise than earth.”<sup>67</sup> That their relationship extended beyond spiritual kinship would be quite speculative, but it is certainly fair to say that they extended great fondness and affection for each other. Sarah’s language is consistently provocative and erotic, most especially when she is overcome by the presence of Christ

The writings of Sarah Anderson Jones animate to an extraordinary degree, the character of the early American Methodist. The combined elements of emotionalism, ecstasy, rigorousness, enthusiasm, and evangelism<sup>68</sup> that gave early American Methodism its distinctive flavor, were found in full strength in Sarah Anderson Jones. Her rigorous piety included ascetic practices not unlike previous generations of mystical Christian spirituality. By way of her vivid imagination and undying passion she was brought into intimate physical contact with Jesus in the throws of ecstasy. Her enthusiasm and proficiency at prayer and exhortation melted the souls of many, including Francis Asbury.<sup>69</sup> In spite of limitations imposed by her gender, she would not miss an opportunity to lead a lost soul through the fire to find joy and rest in the arms of Jesus. The excerpts from her letters and diary have demonstrated that she was a supreme example of American Methodist spirituality in its most extreme form. In the poem that follows, Sarah Anderson Jones gives voice to the exuberance that lifted her beyond her earthly existence and finds her quite naturally, “all in raptures.”

What mighty joys run thro my heart  
 What sudden glories thro me dart.  
 How high my heaven none can tell  
 My bosom glow, my passions swell.

My Jesus hath unveiled his face  
 And levels all the painful space.  
 He in my heart hath desired to come  
 And all my passions make him room.

New beauties strike me with delight  
 My Jesus smiles, Oh lovely sight!  
 Transporting pleasures thro me rooll (roll)  
 In rivulets across my soul.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Minter, ed., *Devout Letters*, 44, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Lester Ruth identifies these core characteristics of American Methodism in *The Spirituality and Life of Early Methodists*. See also Cynthia Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 30-46, who identifies “The Marrow of the Methodist Self” with similar language.

<sup>69</sup> Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, I:510-511.

<sup>70</sup> Jones, *Diary*, 6 November 1792.