
Religious Borders: Elizabeth Webb's Many Crossings

Rachel Cope*¹

¹Brigham Young University – United States

Abstract

At the age of twelve, Elizabeth Webb (1663–1726) of Gloucestershire, England, decided that Quakerism, not the Church of England, contained religious truth. Years later, she informed her husband, Richard Webb, that God had called her to go to America as a missionary. Elizabeth, along with a Quaker woman named Mary Rogers, departed from Bristol in November 1697. For eighteen months, they preached in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. After completing her mission, Elizabeth crossed the Atlantic and returned to England. Shortly thereafter, in 1700, the Webb family emigrated from England to Pennsylvania, ultimately settling in Chester County, Pennsylvania. In 1710, Elizabeth once again crossed the Atlantic to visit England, and while there wrote about her conversion and call to the Quaker ministry. Prior to her death in 1727, she wrote "Notes on the Book of Revelation," a manuscript that remained unpublished. Elizabeth's decision to convert to a radical faith at the young age of twelve was the first of many borders she crossed throughout her life. Later, her missionary labors resulted in the crossing of Transatlantic borders. Her writing also crosses borders as her decision to write spiritual memoir not only allowed her to recount her spiritual pilgrimage, but also served as a form of travel writing, a literal account of her extensive journeys throughout America. And her dedication to preaching and writing Biblical commentary enabled her to cross countless gendered boundaries. Although scholars have considered Elizabeth's missionary labors in America, no one has ever examined her manuscript, "Notes on the Book of Revelation," closely. This presentation will contextualize Elizabeth's authorship of this unique manuscript, and will explore the many examples of border crossing that are encapsulated in its pages—a manuscript whose story captures a woman crossing boundaries in order to enter a male-dominated literary space. In making this crossing, I contend, Elizabeth claimed spiritual and intellectual authority. She not only crossed borders to write theologically, but also became an authority-called by and inspired of God, as she explained it—on the subject of crossing borders between heaven and earth. She became a mouthpiece for the Holy Spirit.

*Speaker