

Religion and American Slavery

Student Guide

Lesson IV. Black Antebellum Abolitionists Motivated by their Religion: Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth

Begin the Lesson

Visit the [Student Learning Hub](#) to begin Lesson IV of the *Religion and American Slavery* series. At the bottom of each online step, you will find a button to proceed to the next step. Individual steps are also listed below with hyperlinks, which you can access if you are viewing this document on a digital device.

[Step 1. Black Antebellum Abolitionists Motivated by Their Religion](#)

[Step 2. Learn About Nat Turner](#)

[Step 3. Learn About Denmark Vesey](#)

[Step 4. Learn About Harriet Tubman](#)

[Step 5. Learn About Sojourner Truth](#)

Prepare for Class Discussion

Step 6. Compare

Many abolitionists, including Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth, had certain key elements in common. To start, while these formerly enslaved people generally had little access to religious written word, they were still active listeners and determined for themselves how to interpret stories they believed held the key to their salvation. They also provided hope and inspiration to future abolitionists. What else do they have in common?

Prepare for class discussion by responding to the questions below.

- What was the source of their religious motivation?
- How did they connect to inherited African traditions?
- Who did they feel responsible for?
- What role did they believe God had in store for them?
- How did they use the power of oration and dialogue?

Step 7. Contrast

Even while these abolitionists—Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth—had key elements in common, they each had their unique experiences. These distinctions do not necessarily mean one abolitionist was more worthy, effective, or impactful than another. For example, each abolitionist was in a different region. Turner and Vesey were in Southern states: Virginia and South Carolina. Tubman was in the border state of Maryland, which was a slave state that did not secede during the Civil War. Lastly, Truth was from the North, specifically New York. What else was different about their stories?

Prepare for class discussion by responding to these questions.

- Which abolitionists believed they experienced revelation?
- Which abolitionists were free?
- What was their community?
- What methods did they use?
- What were the responses to their efforts?

Step 8. Coming Together

On the whole, religion was an important motivator for these abolitionists' fight for freedom. Nat Turner fought for religious freedom, and all connected to their community's struggle to liberation and the Biblical story of Exodus. Religion was a large part of the responsibility they felt towards their communities and enslaved Black people everywhere. Religion strengthened bonds and enabled big and small rebellious acts. In the case of Denmark Vesey, he was able to draw on up to 9,000 slaves from the city of Charleston, South Carolina. Harriet Tubman risked her life to travel into the South and rescue many fellow slaves. And despite laws shaping public discourse about slavery, all continued to speak out for abolition. They were powerful orators, called by God, they believed, to preach the truth of equality for all people. Specifically, the words of Sojourner Truth were heard loud and clear across the nation and have left great impact even today.

Prepare for class discussion by choosing 2-3 questions and writing down your response.

- How was religion integral to these movements? How might their efforts have been different without religious elements?
- What is religious freedom? Did rebellions create more or less religious freedom?
- What does leadership look like? What leaders do you know of were "marked for greatness"?
- How can religion organize a community and bring it together? What is something tying your community together?
- How is literacy and public discourse important, especially in the context of the Antebellum era in American history? (The period leading up to the Civil War.)
- This lesson emphasizes the importance of religious motivations for these historical figures. What other motivations do you think they had?