

# Religion and American Slavery

## Teacher's Guide

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

#### Learning Objective

In this lesson, students will explore the biographies of Black Antebellum abolitionists motivated by their religion to claim their own freedom and fight for the freedom of others in their community.

#### Biography Summaries

1. **Nat Turner** was an enslaved literate Christian preacher who escaped slavery. He believed God told him to return and free other slaves. He led a violent rebellion that killed at least 50 white people. He and his co-conspirators were hanged. As a result of the rebellion, the Virginia legislature passed laws further constraining the freedom of enslaved people.
2. **Denmark Vesey** was born into slavery but was able to purchase his freedom. He became a leader of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. He believed God called him to organize a rebellion plot that involved up to 9,000 slaves and free Blacks. The plot was discovered and Vesey and his co-conspirators were killed. The South Carolina legislature then passed harsh laws constraining the freedom of enslaved and free Blacks.
3. **Harriet Tubman** escaped Maryland slavery in 1849 but soon returned to rescue her niece. Tubman believed it was her duty to lead as many of her people as possible from slavery to freedom as Moses did for the Israelites from Egypt. She believed God guided her as she led others to freedom.
4. **Sojourner Truth** escaped slavery in 1826 in New York. She practiced a mix of African spirituality and Protestantism. She believed she had a vision from God to travel and argue for abolition.

#### Links to Lesson Steps

These steps guide students to learn about these four abolitionists. In the steps that follow these, students are prompted to answer questions to prepare for class discussion.

[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 Students for Class Discussion

### Step 6. Compare

In the module, students are prompted to read this text for Step 6:

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?

In the module, students are prompted to answer these questions on their own and bring their answers to the class discussion:

- 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?

### **Teacher Preparation for Class Discussion**

Below are some possible connections that can be drawn between these four abolitionists.

1. All four drew on the Biblical story of Exodus where Moses led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. They all wanted the right to freedom and liberation for their people.
2. Turner experienced divination. Vesey drew on a pan-African community of traditions which included conjuring, speaking with spirits, and predicting the future. Truth was taught to directly commune with the heavens. And while not explicitly mentioned, Tubman could be said to have learned a very similar tradition from her own parents.
3. All four felt deeply responsible for their communities. Turner's community was the slaves of Southampton County, Virginia. Vesey's community was the Black population of Charleston, South Carolina. Tubman's community was primarily in Maryland, but it extended to each slave population where she rescued friends, family, and even strangers. Truth's community extended widely to the remaining slave populations across the country. In New York, her home, Black people had already been emancipated.
4. Each was a community leader and felt chosen or favored by God. Turner felt chosen to instigate his rebellion. Vesey was miraculously freed and then became a leader in his church. Tubman felt favored by God and that gave her strength to take the risks that she did. Truth believed she was named and chosen by God to preach the truth to her people across the country.
5. Turner and Vesey used oration in their religious communities to strengthen their rebellions. Tubman and Truth, especially later in their lives, used oration to travel the country and speak for abolition. Turner, Vesey, and Truth specifically preached.

## Step 7. Contrast

In the module, students are prompted to read this text for Step 7:

Even while these abolitionists—Nate 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?

In the module, students are prompted to answer these questions on their own and bring their answers to the class discussion:

- 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?

### **Teacher Preparation for Class Discussion**

Below are some suggestions for contrasting the four abolitionists.

1. Turner and Truth believed they witnessed visions from God. Tubman and Truth believe they talked directly to God.
2. All four were free at some part of their story. Turner was enslaved for most of his life except for the 30 days he escaped early on and the two months he avoided capture after the rebellion. Vesey was able to purchase his freedom at the age of 32. Tubman escaped when she was 27 years old and was free for the rest of her life. Truth escaped when she was about 29 years old and was free for the rest of her life.
3. For both Turner and Vesey, community was limited more to their direct circles. Community was where they lived. For Tubman and Truth, their sense of community extended to where they had access. Both had opportunities to travel across the country.
4. Turner and Vesey both sought to utilize violent rebellions in their abolitionist efforts. They believed this method was necessary and justified by God. To contextualize their struggles, their movements occurred in deep Southern states. Tubman practiced nonviolent resistance by rescuing slaves and being noncompliant with the system of slavery. Later in her life, much like Sojourner Truth, Tubman used the power of civil discourse to change minds and hearts towards the cause of abolition.
5. There were varied responses to each of their endeavors. For Turner, there was a local vigilante and legislative response, which inspired similar legislation in other states. For Vesey, there was a local vigilante and legislative response, which inspired similar legislation in other states and significantly led to the Nullification Crisis of 1832. The Underground Railroad, which Tubman was a part of for ten years, inspired legislation like the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Lastly, Truth helped start conversations across the country about abolitionism. So, while there was not a

singular response to her efforts, her work threatened pro-slavery agendas and received its own backlash.

### Step 8. Coming Together

In the module, students are prompted to read this text for Step 8:

On the whole, religion was an important motivator for these abolitionists' fight for freedom. Nate 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.

In the module, students are prompted to answer 2-3 of the questions below on their own and bring their answers to the class discussion.

- 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?