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# When We Get Up Yonder, We Shall Have Them Rights Restored to Us: Sojourner Truth's "The Injustice of Slavery" and the Rhetoric of Black Liberation Theology of Hope

Nordia Bennett

## Introduction

*"Yes, said she, fervently, that's a good thought! Thank you, God, for that thought."* Those were the very words that rolled off the tongue of Isabella Van Wagener as she decided to pursue freedom when her enslaver refused to grant her freedom. Before Isabella Van Wagener transformed her life and became Sojourner Truth, she experienced life as an illiterate slave. Truth's early childhood carried hints of a future prophetic calling. From an early age, her mother taught her a belief system that emphasized the primacy and sacredness of truth. The distinguished Afrocentric scholar Miriam MA 'At-Ka-Re Monges argues that this focus on truth resonates with the Ma'atian tradition, an ancient Egyptian (and more broadly, ancient African) principle.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, Isabella and her siblings were taught about a divine power that would neither leave nor forsake them. She instructed them to seek help from this divine power whenever they were in trouble. Her mother's teachings in the African American tradition marked the greatest influence on Truth's life in her early childhood. Thus, it is not surprising that she did not know much about Christianity when she arrived in New York City in 1829. In 1832, she joined the religious community by attending the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

As a free woman, Isabella Van Wagner developed a strong desire to understand the Bible. Her focus concentrated mostly on her personal interpretation of the Bible through the lens of the black experience. As a result, she came to the conclusion that the spirit of truth spoke specifically through scriptures, as this was filtered through her hermeneutical and experiential frames. Not long afterward, Isabella felt a call to leave New York City despite the fact she did not know anyone outside the state. She changed her name to Sojourner Truth as a proclamation of the fact that she was now a new person whose spiritual experience authorized her to make self-determining choices.<sup>2</sup> With her transition from

1 Miriam Ma'At-Ka-Re Mon Ges, "Sojourner Truth: Bringing Order out of Chaos," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (2005): 682-86.

2 Ibid., 682.

Isabelle Van Wagener to Sojourner Truth, she transformed into a significant icon of justice for enslaved Africans and all women. Her experiences – marked by the physical, mental, sexual, and spiritual torture that she endured – shows just how remarkable this transformation was. And yet she pursued a life of passion that freed her of the limitations bestowed on her life. In this paper, I argue that Sojourner Truth's "The Injusti of Slavery" speech proclaims an exodus narrative that envisions the Christian religion as a black liberation project. I go on to show how her vision of religion differs from the mainstream idea of Christianity as personal salvation and carries within it the seeds that would sprout as a form of black liberation theology of hope.

This paper matters because Truth reminds us that we will not run away from history. Structural racism continues to be a dominant force in American life. According, to Michelle Alexander in her astounding book, *The New Jim Crow*, the racially-driven War on Drugs has had a devastating effect on African American communities. The United States has the world's highest rate of mass incarceration. The criminal justice system in the United States, As Alexander's book documents, is constructed to facilitate the continued oppression of black people. Sojourner Truth's speech, *On the Injustice of Slavery*, shows that the citizens of the United States must face the reality that nothing much has really changed for black people. It is also important to study this text in order to continue the process of shedding light on neglected or ignored African American intellectuals and texts.

This paper draws on black liberation theology as a hermeneutic for understanding Truth's speech. Black liberation theology derives from the context of "black suffering at the hands of rampant white racism." As an academic discipline, the basic framework of black liberation theology emerged from the theologian James Cone. According, to Cone, black theology is a result of the failure of "white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society."<sup>3</sup> In response, black theology identifies with the oppression of African Americans and interprets the bible in the light of the black condition. This interpretation sees the gospel as a message of liberation for blacks to break their chains of oppression. Cone's theology revolves around the idea that God is ontologically black and that God strongly identified with the oppressed. He asserts a commitment to Christ as a radical, black Messiah who, in keeping with the will of God, was concerned with the disruption of status quo institutions. Cone argues that as a Christian committed to freeing blacks from oppression, he, himself was locked in a struggle to bring the Christian gospel in line with racial social critique.

3 Linda Thomas, "The Social Sciences and Rituals of Resilience," in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, eds. Dwight Hopkins and Antonio Edward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 48.

## Analysis

It is in light of this background that I will conduct a close reading of Sojourner Truth's speech. Truth declared in her speech, *"but I believe in the next world. When we get up yonder, we shall have them rights restored to us"*. Her statement here channels a longstanding belief within the African American community that God will liberate them. As Cone has argued, many blacks interpreted the Exodus narrative as a promise that they too will be liberated like the Egypt of slavery. Cone emphasizes the importance of the Jesus event as a point of ontological departure when considering the oppressed situation for what it symbolizes. The Jesus event correlates to what Jesus is doing in current circumstances: Jesus is past, present, and future. When viewing Jesus from the past, African Americans are able to see that He intervened and liberated the oppressed. At the same time, they look forward to a future that shows the oppressed will be liberated if they actively work toward emancipation. But such a perspective does not involve a dualism of the material (or the earthly) versus the spiritual (or the heavenly). Rather, it starts from taking the historical Jesus seriously. It is only in seeing Jesus as historical that one can understand Jesus's actions and what he does. Blacks, according to this view, know where Jesus is coming from; therefore, they know what he is capable of. Having the historical Jesus and knowing what it involves allows African Americans to become aware of Jesus's divine power. Truth, like the later black liberation theologians, grounds her faith in the story of Jesus and what He stands for.<sup>4</sup>

In her speech, Truth cries out to Jesus to rescue her from oppression and often speaks in a manner that equates Jesus to slaves. In one plaintive section of the speech, she exclaims, *"Oh! Till the blood run down the floor and I asked God, why don't you come and relieve me, if I was you and you'se tied up so, I'd do it for you."* This prefigures black liberation theology's view of Jesus. Cone emphasizes Jesus' Jewishness which he then points out is structurally that of a black person in the contemporary world. Cone looks into the past identity, present identity, and future coming of Jesus. Cone uses the events of Jesus's life to construct Jesus as a symbol of Blackness. Jesus being viewed as black means that Jesus identifies with the poor, individuals living in oppression, and on behalf of the liberation community. With that, Cone proclaims "Jesus is black" because he is truly representing those in the oppressed community. Further examining the sociological context of the situation, God identified himself with the oppressed by being born in a marginalized community. Truth's words reflect a belief that God is capable of feeling the pain that blacks feel. She questions why God does not intervene to stop her pain. Yet, it also

4 James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 112.

reflects her knowledge that Jesus experienced the same. Both parties can identify with one another because they know of pain, humiliation, and oppression.

Truth's speech then makes a turn, condemning the value system undergirding the socioeconomic system in the United States: "*But I have had children and yet never owned one, no one ever owned one; and of such there's millions, who goes to teach them? You have teachers for your children but who will teach the poor slave children?*" Here, Truth offers a critique of the U.S. economic system as revolving around valuing white lives over black lives. She illustrates this point by pointing out the manner in which black children and white children are raised differently. Their privileges do not equate to one another and it is problematic because slavery revolved around white children being valued above black children. Truth anticipates the theological insight that the economic cannot be separated from the theological. According to theologian M. Douglas Meeks, "economics cannot be separated from the religious dimensions of life..." For Meeks, it is imperative to start with suffering rather than the economist's focus on statistics. This perspective insists that economics is held accountable to moral values. Thus, economic statistics are then subject to critique. For example, the majority of blacks within the United States are suffering from some sort of oppression; homelessness, hunger, and socioeconomic despair. Factors contributing to this suffering within the public household poverty are racism and sexism. Truth's way of making the point is to reference the privileges of white children and the devaluing of black children.

The idea that theology should be the lens for understanding economics comes from a long tradition in religious discourse. "Give us this day our daily bread" and "forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors," so goes the Lord's Prayer, central to the Christian faith. Meeks argues that God's justice means for all to have a home and to have livelihood. God's justice means for all to thrive, not just survive. Market logic is colder, making people earn their livelihood rather than allowing them to have access to it.<sup>5</sup> It is telling that Truth's "*who will teach the poor slave children*" is not so much a question requiring an answer as a rhetorical question that implies an answer. She knows no one will. In this sense, she knows the socioeconomic system is a direct violation of natural rights law. As stated by John Locke in 1689, the law of nature obliged all human beings not to harm "the life, the liberty, health, limb, or good of another" if one was not harming another. Based on the arguments fashioned by Meeks and the natural law of Locke, there is not an answer that will enable an understanding of why and who is going to teach the black slaves. The

5 M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 47.

political metaphors of God as economist holds that the economy should be one in which all have access to livelihoods, not just the wealthy.

There is an aphorism that says “God is not on Wall Street.” This aphorism suggests that God is not where white privilege exists. Wall Street is classified as a financial sector that is the center of capitalist power and exchange. It is not a place the poor are located because it is a place that profits from slavery and the oppression of the destitute. Meeks argues that the U.S. economic order fosters scarcity and insecurity. Such an economic system inspires possessive individualism. Black people are excluded from the very things that the rest of the population in the United States considers to be essential for independence and wealth.

Truth’s speech emphasizes the fact that black people are robbed of their capacity to care for their own children. *“I want to know what has become of love I ought to have for my children? I did have love for them, but what has become of it? I cannot tell you.”* She gives expression to the desire by African American parents that they should protect their children even as they found that they could not provide for the children’s needs. This devastating line appears to reveal Truth’s anguish. I believe Truth is trying to articulate the importance of *love* in one’s relationships and yet at the same time show that black people are denied this basic connection.

Truth’s speech, therefore, offers a strong illustration of how her message anticipated the message of black liberation theology. This is also clear from her overall vocation. Truth traveled from place to place giving speeches and sermons. Truth’s speaking and traveling was in the spirit of the ancient prophets. She was not only viewed as an advocate for black people and women, but also as sent by God. She began to forge a reputation as a speaker at antislavery and women’s rights meetings.<sup>6</sup> The traveling component of Truth is essential to understanding her agenda because it is embedded in who she is. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann refers to “the theory of world-transforming, future-seeking missionary practices...as the call to obedient molding of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Truth in many ways embodies the phenomenon of a world-transforming, future-seeking, missionary. Truth’s actions seek to enact the promises of God. Truth’s practice of world-transformation was driven by confidence and hope. She had a vision and worked toward it. There are many prominent events in Truth’s life that displays how she acted to fulfil the promises that she believed came from God. For example, in 1879, she presented President Ulysses S. Grant with a petition calling

6 Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: In Life and Memory* (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), p. 45.

7 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 288.

for the settlement of the freed-people because she believed in the black migration for slaves.<sup>8</sup>

Truth's theology is an example of what Moltmann describes as emanating with "a whiff of the future" because it makes someone very "restless and urgent, seeking and searching beyond all experiences of fulfillment."<sup>9</sup> According to Moltmann, one's hopes, longings, and desires are manifested through a specific promise, it only extends the yearning for fulfillment that is beyond what is received in the beginning. They are looking for the higher fulfillment that outweighs the minor fulfillment that will allow them to be satisfied. Being that Truth's theology had already caught a glimpse of what reality will be like when it is fulfilled, it can be said to do what Moltmann argues a theology of hope should do. Truth's theology, much like Moltmann's gives "confirmation and liberation for a greater hope that was not previously there. At some magnitude it even expands and broaden history of promise because it has been transitioned to a new level that now has to be fulfilled."

Truth's actions display how her eschatology of hope took the form of active involvement to transform her surroundings. The hope and faith that Truth possessed was prominent in her travels to advocate for the lot of the oppressed and to fight against slavery. In this, Truth's theology finds elaboration in Moltmann's theology. Moltmann argues for a view that sees the revelation of God as involving a discovery of God's promises.<sup>10</sup> Revelation opens up a future of promises by unlocking and unveiling the truth and knowledge of God. The actions of God allow people within the present to open up to a future of promise. Revelation breaks open the present to reveal the promises of the future: a future in God. Revelation reveals the promise and initiates that promise. The future is always arriving for people who have faith in Christ. They have hope in the future and act in ways that subvert the present in order to bring the future.

### Conclusion

What are the implications of this paper? This paper shows the deep history and richness of a black theology of liberation. Truth grounds herself in what I have argued is a black liberation theology of hope. This theology identifies with the oppressed community because of her determination to make a difference within society. Truth's black liberation theology proclaims that God identifies with the oppressed by uplifting them to look past their circumstances and work towards a fu-

<sup>8</sup> Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 237.

<sup>9</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 105.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

ture of freedom. The terrors of racial and gender inequality, looked at from the perspective of black theology, are no longer viewed as insurmountable. Rather, those who suffer these hardships sincerely believe that they will end. It has become essential within the black community to preserve this belief because it shows that God is present in their daily lives regardless of the circumstances.

Truth's life and activism cannot be dismissed as simply referring to the past. She criticizes the racial political and economic system that values white lives over black lives. These disparities are very much alive in present day America. Racism continues to occur in the form of institutional and systemic oppression. Moreover, structural patriarchy holds hegemonic power. Truth teaches that in order to break the chains of oppression and institutionalized modern day slavery, black people must ground themselves in eschatological hope and must actively participate to work for their freedom. Truth displayed those characteristics in her personal fight for freedom as she dismantled the limitations projected onto her by educating herself and by believing in something no one could take away from her.

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