

**PRIMARY
SOURCE**

“AIN’T I A WOMAN?”—SOJOURNER TRUTH

CHAPTER 10

Sojourner Truth (1795-1883) was born into slavery in New York State. She gained her freedom in 1827, when that state emancipated its slaves. At the age of forty-six, after working in New York City as a domestic for some years, she felt that she had been called by the Lord to travel up and down the land testifying to the sins against her people.

Dropping her slave name, Isabella, she took the symbolic name of Sojourner Truth. She spoke at camp meetings, private homes, wherever she could gather an audience. By mid-century she was well known in anti-slavery circles and a frequent speaker at abolitionist gatherings.

Sojourner Truth consistently and actively identified herself with the feminist cause from the early years of the women’s movement. She attended the First National Women’s Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850—the only black woman present. Massachusetts was the center of abolitionist sentiment and the million and a half black women of the South still in slavery were not forgotten by the convention delegates. A resolution was adopted referring to these women—“the most grossly wronged and foully outraged of all women”—and vowing that “in every effort for an improvement in our civilization, we will bear in our heart of hearts the memory of the trampled womanhood of the plantation, and omit no effort to raise it to a share in the rights we claim for ourselves.”

The following year Sojourner Truth was a participant in a woman’s convention at Akron, Ohio, presided over by Frances D. Gage. Gage later reported that some of the women present were far from happy at seeing Sojourner Truth walk in, and begged the chairman not to let her speak, for fear that “every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed with abolition.”

The Akron convention was marked by the presence of many men of the cloth, most of whom apparently were opposed to the granting of freedom to women. One based his argument in favor of male privilege on man’s greater intellect; another on the manhood of Christ; another on the sin of Eve. Finally, the atmosphere of the convention became somewhat stormy. As Gage related the scene, “slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth. . . . ‘Don’t let her speak!’ gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced, ‘Sojourner Truth,’ and begged the audience to keep silence for a few minutes.”

The simple moving words of Sojourner Truth had an effect on the gathering Gage described as “magical.” Beforehand, the ministers seemed to be getting the better of the women, much to the delight of “the boys in the galleries”; but the speaker had “taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty turned the whole tide in our favor.”

Sojourner Truth never learned to read or write. The speech she delivered at the Akron convention was not officially recorded; it survives because it was written down by Frances Gage.

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that ‘twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could

work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [Member of audience whispers, “Intellect.”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says

women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong

enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.