



LESSONS FROM THE BLACK WOMEN WHO SHAPE US

Jasmine L. Holmes

Carved in Ebony

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WOMEN WHO SHAPE US



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For the Black women who shape me
Mommy—Bridget
Mama—Ophelia
and Ma—Karen

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Foreword

Ebony.

Stubborn. Unyielding. Commodified. Precious.

The ebony tree is most often found standing alone on a vast savanna, defying harsh elements that would wither other vegetation.

She survives and grows because her Planter watches over her solitude with love and careful attention.

As she matures, she receives a hundred years of sunlight and rich earth nourishment, and stretches her limbs toward the nighttime stars.

When the Planter becomes Woodsman, she is suddenly felled. Though her fall to the ground is hard and resounding, her Woodsman is no harsh plunderer. He only earnestly desires to fashion her ebony trunk into the eternal, priceless commodity he intended from her seed-hood.

Once fallen, her nature is still stubborn and unyielding, except in the hands of the expert Craftsman who has now brought her to his side.

He leaves off his large cutting tools and moves to fine carving, excising unnecessary pieces to reveal what he sees inside her roughhewn trunk. He shapes her edges, softening some and

leaving others intentionally sharp for the moment they are used for her good and his glory.

The Craftsman leans in close for this detailed work, eye and hand anticipating every nick, dark curl, and plunging wave—intention and love guiding his precision. As he polishes with his cloth, his creation drinks deep of his nourishing holy oil. A million crisscrossed hues unveil from within her darkness, uncovering the Master’s splendor that he knew lay deep within.

Jasmine Holmes is herself a work of the Master Craftsman, and she has unearthed ten completed works of art: women from American history who were likewise “carved in ebony” and yielded to their Creator. She gives voice to the particular struggles and kingdom victories of pioneering, self-sacrificing Black female missionaries, and celebrates God’s glory in their lives and his kingdom advance in their respective spheres.

In this volume, Mrs. Holmes has flipped our vision to see as God sees. As we arrive at the final words of her last chapter, we regard as wise what the world called foolish; what the world regarded as unremarkable, God’s purpose has made most noteworthy; and what the world called weak, we now see as strong.

Carved in Ebony captures many truths, but this one rings: left to grow wildly on our own, we all remain as stubborn, unyielding, and vulnerable as the ebony tree. Yet the Master Craftsman sees what each is to be, and longs for us to be pliable in his hands. He anoints his own with the oil of the Spirit, and we in turn may reveal his splendor and presence to a world of other solitary, precious, eternal works of art.

I’m grateful to witness the age of rediscovery, uncovering God’s work in unlikely places, through unlikely people. *Carved in Ebony* is a wonderful contribution to this necessary movement, for if the truth is to be told, most of us will be remembered much like these women—faithful servants overlooked in the annals of men, but whose lasting kingdom-building deeds

Foreword

are recorded and rewarded by the Savior who sees, hears, and promises to remember all.

Take this moment and pray with me—right now—that many more overlooked stories of faithfulness will be uncovered and told as an encouragement to the next generations . . . perhaps even shared under the shade of an ebony tree, growing alone in a far-off land.

—K.A. Ellis, director,
Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity

Introduction

I never understood the excitement that my friends shared about reading the entire Bible in a year. In my two decades as a believer, I have tried to complete this elusive task more than once, and each time I have failed. Sometimes, I make it to the major prophets; sometimes, I stall out in Genesis. Other times, I bounce around and find solace in the Gospels and epistles; and still others, I am lost in miles of Old Testament genealogies and ceremonial laws.

The Bible is many things. It is the God-breathed Word (2 Timothy 3:16) that tells the truth of the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). It holds the law, which teaches us how to live (Galatians 3:24); and it holds the Gospel, which offers us the hope of Christ's atoning sacrifice when we fall short (Romans 3:23–24).

The Bible is also a story. It weaves a tale of God's faithfulness to his people, from his first promise of a Savior in Genesis 3:15, to his providential choice of that Savior's family line in Genesis 12, to the long and winding journey of that promise's ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. And so, the Bible

is also history—the history of the little nation through which God chose to bless all of the nations in the world.

Israel often retells the story of God’s faithfulness to them: when Moses led them across the Red Sea—before they entered the Promised Land itself—when they stood on the precipice of captivity—while they were in exile—when they returned. Story is written into their feasts and celebrations; they are commanded to recount the story of God’s faithfulness to their little nation, and they recount it with gusto. Often. And it has only been through finally—finally—reading the Bible from cover to cover in a year that I have seen the pattern of recounting over and over and over again.

We Christians also have to remind ourselves of the story of God’s faithfulness to our people over and over again. Because, like Israel, we are all too easily inclined to forget.

I write this book not as an intellectual or a member of the academy, but as a storyteller. My interest in history—from the historical novels I devoured as a child to the day job I had for nine years teaching history to middle schoolers—has always flowed from my love of *story*. And I am enraptured by the story that God weaves through the people he chooses to do his work here on earth.

When the Underground Railroad was at the height of its endeavor to free the enslaved people in the United States, the imagery of Israel’s rescue from slavery was often employed. Harriet Tubman herself was called Moses, after the man God chose to guide his people through the Red Sea and on their journey to the Promised Land. In some places, the story of Moses was considered so dangerous that slaves¹ were not allowed access to it. Slave owners did not want to teach the story of the God who heard the cries of his people, remembered his promise to them, and led them in a victorious march toward freedom.

But they did hear the story—not just of Israel’s freedom from captivity, but of God’s unfolding faithfulness toward his

people. And not only did they hear the story, they took up the work of sharing that story with their children, their children's children, and the nations.

As an American, it can feel threatening to tell the entire story of God's work in this nation, particularly during these polarized times. Is it unpatriotic to shine light on America's unfaithfulness to God's Word? Is it "dwelling in the past" to keep bringing up the unsavory subject of this country's shabby record of acting in good faith toward its Black² residents? Should we move on from these facts, or try to paint them in a more understanding light to shield the "men of their time" from our judgment? How much retelling is *enough* retelling?


In her groundbreaking work *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson makes a compelling argument for understanding race relations in America in years past as a sort of caste system. She writes, "Americans are loath to talk about enslavement in part because what little we know about it goes against our perception of our country as a just and enlightened nation, a beacon of democracy for the world."³ Her statement points to the truth that, when we tell the story of America, we want to tell the uplifting version of our scrappy young nation's rise to world superpower.

We could speak in vain platitudes about equality and opportunity for all. We could tout American exceptionalism as a religious truth and a coveted birthright.


I want to offer a different perspective, though. What if, instead of putting Uncle Sam in a cape and putting Lady Liberty on a pedestal, we told the story of America as the story of God's faithfulness—and not our own? What if we took a note from the people of Israel, and every time we stood on the precipice of a defining cultural moment, we reminded ourselves of God's providential hand protecting us *in spite of* our waywardness? Our disobedience? Our forgetfulness? Our selfishness? Our avarice?

What if we put God's glory at the center of our concern for the telling of our story, and left America's glory to fend for herself?

What if, like Israel, the American church proclaimed our history from the perspective of God's goodness in spite of our folly—not from the perspective of hiding from our folly?



What if we told the story of America as the story of God's faithfulness—not our own?



By this comparison, I don't mean to say that America is *literally* a replacement for Israel. Rather, I mean to point to the fact that, in Christ, Israel's family has been expanded to include everyone who calls on the name of Jesus. And as a nation that claims Christian roots, we have a lot to learn from God's first chosen people.

It is from this perspective that I seek to tell you the story of ten incredible Black women. I tell you about their plight in our nation not to rub America's nose in her corporate sin, but to proclaim the glory of the God who heard their cries and answered their prayers and used them mightily *in spite of* their country of origin. I tell you about their struggles and their triumphs not to elevate their Blackness, but to elevate God's grace in creating that brown skin in his image. When I tell you the story of dignified Black womanhood, I do so to combat the opposite narrative, yes, but I also do it to point to the inherent dignity and worth of women, whom God created in his image and for his glory.

God's image carved in ebony.



The first time I read those words, I felt two distinct responses: a thrill of excitement, and a tinge of wariness. The excitement

came first, by a hair. I was reading about Amanda Berry Smith for the first time—evangelist, missionary, devoted wife, mother to biological children, spiritual mother to countless souls, and surrogate mother to so many beautiful brown-skinned faces at the first orphanage of its kind, dedicated to caring for Black children. The woman herself—captured in an old photograph, full lips set in determination, deep eyes steely, nose and cheekbones proudly displaying a heritage I share—looks like she was literally carved from ebony. And the beauty of the fact that the people who knew this beautiful woman best saw God’s image reflected in her gives me chills.

And yet, the tinge of wariness crept in on excitement’s heels. Those powerful words felt almost threatening. A flood of caveats filled my brain as I looked at Amanda Berry Smith’s photograph. *It’s not in the graven-image kind of way*, I could hear myself clarifying to aghast onlookers if I dared name the book you hold in your hands. I’m not suggesting that God is a woman, or a Black woman at that. God is Spirit; he doesn’t have a body like a man does. I’ve been well catechized, I promise. I know that.

But reason quickly calmed me. Because saying that Amanda Berry Smith—or Elizabeth Freeman—or Sara G. Stanley—or Maria Fearing—or Sarah Mapps Douglass—or Nannie Helen Burroughs—or any other woman in these pages—is God’s image carved in ebony isn’t about carving little statues and worshipping little Black deities. It’s about the imago Dei—the image of God. And the fact that, even during a time in history when their personhood was being consistently questioned and cast aside, the ten women profiled in this book staked their claim to the dignity that all of us who have been made in the image of God are due. Not only did they stake their claim to their own personal dignity—they testified to the dignity of others by ministering to fellow image-bearers for his glory and teaching the world about him.

There are so many things I could have called this book. One option came from Sojourner Truth, who, though not profiled here, testified to the personhood of Black women in her stirring speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”

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?⁴

With these words, Sojourner encapsulated a truth that Malcolm X would repeat more than one hundred years later: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.”⁵

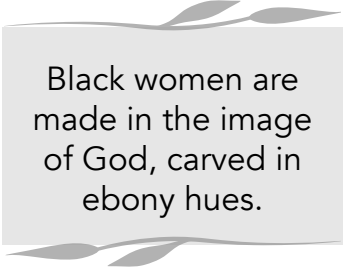
This enslaved woman lived in a world where Victorian notions of femininity painted white women as fragile maidens in need of protection—where they were said to be under the tender care and leadership of the men in their lives, where their virtue was supposedly a thing to be prized. She lived in a world of tightly enforced modesty, chivalry, and smelling salts, one of stiff bodices, immaculate hairdos, and rigorous social standards. But she lived in that world as a Black woman—where none of

those tropes of femininity applied to her own personhood. She lived in a world not of tender leadership but of a loyalty forged in violence, forced ignorance, and systemic injustice. She lived in a world where a Black woman's strength and sexuality were commodities to be bought and sold, taken, and discarded.

But, while the stunning rhetorical ability of Sojourner Truth is always worth emulation, I didn't want to ask a question, rhetorical though it may be. I wanted to make

a statement, one that is not up for debate: Black women are made in the image of God. They are that image carved in ebony hues, wrought with a purpose, for his glory.

These teachers, preachers, missionaries, activists, writers, wives, sisters, and mothers have so much to teach us about what it means to be both Black and American, both woman and citizen, and overwhelmingly and through it all, Christian. Their lives hold encouragement for men and women of every tribe, tongue, and nation because their lives show the beauty of truly understanding what it means to be made in the image of God. As I've learned about each and every one of them, I've grown deeper and deeper in love with my Savior, and I pray the same for every reader. And this book is a celebration of that, yes—an unapologetic rejoicing in the fact that God chose to make each woman profiled in this book both Black and female for his glory. And it was *good*. He looked through the annals of time and chose to sew Black femaleness into the gorgeous tapestry of their identity, and he placed them emphatically in the United States. He gave them myriad gifts, talents, abilities, and callings that they used to glorify him—to proclaim his name while also proclaiming the inherent dignity he gave them when he created them. Even in the face of the hardship that



Black women are
made in the image
of God, carved in
ebony hues.

has forged the story of Black womanhood in the United States, we still boast a beautiful and illustrious history of triumph, innovation, grit, and femininity.

He put them smack-dab in the middle of the story he is telling. By telling their stories, I want to praise the God who wrote them. Seeing these stories merely as an indictment of America's failings is seeing these stories as far too small. Any reflection on America's sordid history is incidental to the bigger picture of the story God is weaving: no matter the failings of a nation, his work will not be silenced. No matter the invisibility of a certain demographic, his work is never silent in the lives of those who love him.

These women—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Maria Stewart, Lucy Craft Laney, and others—mean so much to me as a young Black woman not because of the supremacy of blackness or Americanness, but because of the faithfulness of God. As I read each of their names, I see a testimony of God's loving-kindness, of his triumph, of the beautiful diversity he has invested into American history—a diversity that is so often overlooked.

I remember the first time I read Sojourner's speech. I was teaching in an inner-city school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and was trying to collect a group of Black historical figures for my students to write about. I stood in front of a room full of predominately Black ninth- and tenth-grade girls and shared her words for the first time, and in their faces I saw an echo of the excitement I felt in the sharing: Black women are woven throughout the history of America, and we matter.

I *am* a woman who is both Black and American. And I stand in a long line of women who balanced those aspects of their identity with dignity and significance. I am proud to stand as the recipient of their legacies—to learn from their incredible stories. This group of women has so much to teach me. And as I strike out on a balancing act of my own, each and every one of them continues to inspire me.

I stand here as a recipient of their legacy, yes. But more than that, I stand here as a recipient of the larger legacy they are part of: the legacy of the work God is doing to spread the Gospel throughout the nations using people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. The work God is doing to claim a people for himself and to equip them for his service. He is doing that work in me—he has done this work in other women like me for a very long time.

I specifically chose to focus the biographical sketches in this book around a very short antebellum/postbellum period. I did this for a number of reasons.

First, it is a historical period I find myself most drawn to, both as a learner and a teacher. At this writing, I have just finished up teaching my ninth-graders the first semester of American history, which ended right about the time the most recent of these activists were born. I could have penned biographies about innumerable Black women across the entire history of our country, but these are the stories that mystified me most.

Second, these women stand at a fascinating historical crossroads. From Elizabeth Freeman's quest for freedom just a few years after the country's founding to Nannie Helen Burroughs's founding of a school for young Black women, all of these women stood at the precipice of American citizenship. The Civil War represents a crossroads of sorts—the transition of Black people in this country operating largely in a slave caste to their carving out what it meant to belong to society as free men and women, and full citizens.

The end of the Civil War, then, meant not just the freedom of the enslaved, but the welcoming in of full-fledged citizens who had been denied their rights as Americans up until this point in history. Even free Black people had found themselves caught in the web of double standards that would be revealed by the War Between the States.

Israel came back from exile to be given the Law again—to renew their commitment to being a nation called by God. Black America came out of the Civil War with brand-new citizenship rights they had to learn to cultivate and protect. The activity leading up to the Civil War and the careful actions afterward set the stage for what it means to be fully Black and fully American. And all of these women played a part in shaping that meaning.

This book is part biography and part memoir—part research, part love letter. I am a writer, a teacher, and a mother—a history buff insofar as it allows me to helm my middle school classrooms well. My goal in these pages is not to give you a comprehensive look at the ten lives included here, but rather to (1) give you a taste of the dynamic lives of these women and to (2) show you which parts of their stories have inspired me in my own journey toward understanding what it means to be part of the story God is telling so that (3) you are inspired to delve deeper into each of their lives to see God’s handiwork and proclaim his goodness.

These women were not perfect. As with any person across the face of our history, we can find missteps and errors, faults and disagreement. But overwhelmingly, each and every one of them represents a beautiful facet of Christian womanhood that has inspired me in my own walk, and that I cannot wait to bring out for you. Where they imitated their Savior, they imitated him well. Where they fell short, his grace was sufficient for them, as it is for us.

We serve a storytelling God. Come meet him through these stories.



A Midwife at the Birth of a Nation

Elizabeth Freeman

Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it—just to stand one minute on God's airth a free woman—I would.

—Elizabeth Freeman

A couple of years ago, a friend of mine posted a Facebook status that caused quite a stir: “What is your favorite thing about Black women?”

The avalanche of responses ranged from outraged “All women matter” statements to truly curious “Why are you singling out Black women?” questions to actual answers to his query. The event set off a domino effect in my brain, spawning a chapter

in my last book, *Mother to Son*, and fueling the entire concept for the book you now hold in your hands.

My friend singled out Black women in his status because, historically, Black women—their strength, their femininity, and their contributions—have been overlooked in this country for decades. We could spend quite a bit of time talking about why that is and how that is—and in the forthcoming chapters, we will. But as we turn our eyes to Elizabeth Freeman, I want to tell you what one of my favorite things about Black women is: our willingness to be advocates.

For our husbands, our children, our brothers, our sisters—Black women have historically stuck our necks out. Each of the ten women in this book shows the beauty of advocacy, but it all starts with Elizabeth, who began advocating for herself, and by extension, others, at the birth of this nation.

The Double-Edged Sword

Now, the strength of Black women is a double-edged sword. It's this supposed extra-human strength that led the man referred to as the father of modern gynecology, J. Marion Sims, to perform grotesque experimental surgeries on Black women without anesthesia in the nineteenth century. It's this supposed extra-human emotional strength that causes people to think of Black women as so “tough” that we can stand up to all kinds of emotional abuse and ill-treatment.

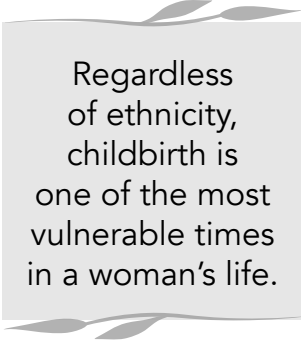
When I talk about our strength, I don't mean an extra measure of strength other ethnicities of women do not possess. Rather, I mean the unique ways that our strength has come to bear in the history of our nation. I mean the unique measure of strength that we have had to employ to survive and thrive in a nation that began with our enslavement—the unique strength we have had to employ to birth children in a society that routinely threatened and dehumanized our families.

I don't mean Herculean physical strength or supernatural emotional strength—I mean the strength that has so often been honed as *advocacy* in our communities.

Advocacy and Motherhood

Now, as a girl who was too timid to order her own food in restaurants until I reached the age of fourteen and my mom refused to do it for me (I almost went hungry on more than one occasion because of my crippling shyness), I have not felt strong many times in my life. My journey toward embracing all that it means to be a *strong* Black woman didn't really start until the birth of my firstborn son.

In the days leading up to his birth, this timid woman learned what it meant to advocate for herself, because by advocating for myself, I was advocating for the future. In 2021, almost two hundred years after that father of gynecology decided Black women were “strong” enough to help found the practice with their unanesthetized bodies, Black women are three times more likely to die in childbirth than their white counterparts.¹ And regardless of ethnicity, childbirth is one of the most vulnerable times in a woman's life, and in giving birth, she is bringing forth the most vulnerable human being we have been called to care for.



Regardless of ethnicity, childbirth is one of the most vulnerable times in a woman's life.

When I gave birth to my first son, that timid girl who couldn't order at restaurants had to become a fierce mama bear ready to roar her child into the world. All of my shyness disappeared as I literally mounted the birth stool, *Roots* style, and ushered my child into the world and into the waiting arms of my husband. It was the first time in my life that I ever remember feeling

strong and capable—one of the moments in my life I think of whenever I reflect on my femininity. Throughout the process of pregnancy, I was able to hold on to this tiny child who lit a fire inside of me—that spark moved me to speak, and eventually taught me how to roar for my baby, and for myself.

You don't have to give birth to feel these things—that strength, that femininity, that power—at least, not literally. But figuratively, those transformative moments when we take the helm of our life and *roar*, changing its course with a force that is as feral as it is feminine, those will always remind me of birth. And that's fitting, because the first woman I'm going to share with you was a midwife.

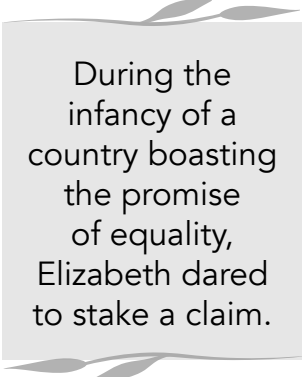
Elizabeth Free-Woman

Elizabeth Freeman, born into slavery as Mum Bett, was the first Black woman to sue for her freedom in the state of Massachusetts in 1781. During the infancy of a country that boasted the promise of equality, she dared stake a claim to that promise herself. Her master, Colonel John Ashley, contributed to the Shef-

field Declaration (a legislative document for the state of Massachusetts similar to the Declaration of Independence), which stated that “mankind in a state of nature are equal, free, and independent of each other, and have a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of their lives, their liberty and property.”²²

Despite helping to pen these words, Ashley himself was a slaveholder, and Elizabeth saw through his hypocrisy. Through the aid of a lawyer friend of

Ashley's, Bett held Massachusetts and Colonel Ashley accountable for the promises it had made.



During the infancy of a country boasting the promise of equality, Elizabeth dared to stake a claim.

Historian Ben Rose observes that Elizabeth's case was "the first in which a slave gained her freedom based on the principle of general equality, rather than by proving physical abuse or wrongful enslavement, as others had done."³ Rose continues,

In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, New Englanders were far more dependent on slave labor than many historians might concede. Africans stripped from the shores of their homeland became artisans and sailors in the region's rum-making and maritime industries. Later, blacks became house servants, soldiers, and field hands, and symbols of success among the lawyers, ministers and merchants who owned them.⁴

The Revolutionary War did not end until 1783, but the fledgling nation of America was working hard to become a country established by the ideals of equality. The colonial North, especially, was heavily influenced by Puritan ideals and was intent upon crafting a nation that honored its residents—even the enslaved people under their care.

History often paints a picture of the South as the only place where the enslaved were bought and sold, but the North had its hand in the trade as well. The biggest difference, though, was that in the North, the enslaved had a recourse for justice.

Elizabeth Freeman was not the first enslaved person to sue her owners. In fact, another slave of John Ashley had already sued him by the time Elizabeth took up her case. However, Elizabeth was the first enslaved woman to do so successfully, setting an important precedent for slavery in Massachusetts and, by extension, all of New England.

Elizabeth was such a skilled domestic and midwife that, even after she won her freedom, John Ashley tried to hire her back. However, she chose to be employed by Theodore Sedgwick, who helped her bring her case to court. Of Elizabeth, Sedgwick once said, "If there could be a practical refutation of the imagined

superiority of our race to hers, the life and character of this woman would afford that refutation.”⁵

The town of Sheffield would go on to become a hub for the Underground Railroad—a place where enslaved people who did not have the means to take their case before a court of law could take full advantage of the freedom that the Sheffield Declaration had declared: “that mankind in a state of nature are equal, free, and independent of each other, and have a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of their lives, their liberty and property.”

Elizabeth’s tombstone reads,

ELIZABETH FREEMAN, also known by the name of MUM-BET died Dec. 28th 1829. Her supposed age was 85 Years. She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly thirty years; She could neither read nor write, yet in her own sphere she had no superior or equal. She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper and the tenderest friend. Good mother, farewell.⁶

Years after her death, her great-great-grandson, W.E.B. Du-Bois, sociologist, educator, scholar, and graduate of both Fisk and Harvard universities, would become one of the founders of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and founder and editor of *The Crisis* magazine. His work would become the catalyst for decades of social change in America, eventually fueling the heyday of the Civil Rights movement and continuing the social change that his great-great-grandmother began by suing for her freedom.

Include (Black) Women in the Sequel

At this writing, a recording of the Tony Award-winning Broadway show *Hamilton* has made its debut on the streaming plat-

form Disney+. Millions of Americans have watched as an ethnically diverse cast sets the very white history of our founding fathers to hip-hop music.

In one scene, Hamilton’s future sister-in-law Angelica Schuyler—played by Renée Elise Goldsberry—swishes across the stage in period dress flanked by her two sisters, Diana Ross & The Supremes style, and raps, “‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ And when I meet Thomas Jefferson, I’m ’a compel him to include *women* in the sequel!”⁷

Renée is one of several Black actresses on stage at this point, and though the Hamilton plot makes some pointed references to slavery (such as a civics lesson from a neighbor, a slaver who doesn’t have to pay for labor), the systemic racism at play in the founding of our country is condemned more by the colorful casting than it is by the words of the play itself.

But Lin-Manuel Miranda’s version of Angelica is, of course, on to something that Elizabeth Freeman realized as well: the Declaration of Independence claimed that all men were created equal and endowed with inalienable rights, while some of its signers withheld these rights from the men and women whom they legally owned.

It’s important to note that at this time, America was still deciding what kind of nation it was going to be. Slavery, though part of the country’s history for over a century at the time of Elizabeth’s trial, was still hotly contested among the founders. As Katharine Gerbner points out in her book *Christian Slavery*, one of the major red flags about slavery early on was that if the colonists shared the Gospel with the enslaved, those Africans would no longer be viewed merely as “savages,” but as brothers and sisters in the faith. Some owners went so far as to withhold the Gospel from their slaves, thinking that, were they baptized, they would hold a special claim to freedom.

In other parts of the world, the enslaved were permitted to read only bits and pieces of the Bible; the Bible titled *Select Parts of the Holy Bible, for the Use of the Negro Slaves, in the British West-India Islands* cut out, for instance, God's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.

Elizabeth stood on the cusp of these decisions, providentially placed in a region that was trying to navigate the legislation of slavery with biblical principles. In 1652, for instance, Rhode Island enacted a law that limited slavery to a term of ten years, trying to imitate the year of Jubilee in the Old Testament (although, notably, this law was not long observed).

In fact, the institution of slavery was beginning to seem so tenuous in Massachusetts that when Quock Walker sued for his freedom shortly after Elizabeth Freeman did, their court cases set a precedent that would effectively topple the institution of slavery in the state during their lifetime.

Elizabeth could have borne this like the fourteen-year-old version of me at a restaurant, but instead she went the lioness-of-a-birth-giver route and demanded what was owed her according to the Massachusetts Constitution in a landmark case that changed the course of slave-owning history in the state—the results of which trickled down and changed the course of my life here in Mississippi.

This woman witnessed the birth of a nation and *took part in that birth* by staking a claim to freedom that would echo throughout generations. While the founding fathers were drafting declarations and signing documents, she was in court advocating for her freedom on the basis of those documents—and taking a bold stance for freedom for every Black person in America.

True, I am an impassioned history teacher who eats this stuff for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It is hard for me not to make this section a dissertation on the rights of man. But one need not be a history buff to appreciate the fact that this

woman—who could not even read, and would not have been allowed into the hallowed halls where decisions were being made for our country—made a decision for herself that changed the course of history. She looked at this fledgling nation and decided to become a partaker in freedoms that most people didn't think even applied to her.

It was magnificent. *She* was magnificent.

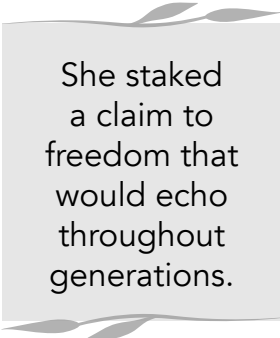
This is the kind of citizen I want to be.

A Forgotten Path to Citizenship

While many are no longer familiar with Elizabeth Freeman's case, most know a bit about Dred Scott's famous lawsuit.

Less than forty years after Elizabeth Freeman's death, America would enter into the bloodiest war in the nation's history over the very issue she contested in that courtroom. The nation would had shifted from one potentially poised to phase out slavery to one in which the southern states were fighting tooth and nail to maintain their "peculiar institution." The same nation that granted Elizabeth her freedom in 1781 would famously deny Dred Scott that freedom more than seventy years later.

In the mid 1800s Dred Scott sued for his freedom on the grounds that much of his servitude had been carried out in free states (states where it was illegal to hold enslaved people). In the long and grueling court proceedings that followed, echoes of Elizabeth's case seemed dim. Elizabeth had been granted her freedom sheerly based on the language in the Declaration of Independence, laying claim to the rights of citizenship that she believed her country promised all of its residents. Yet, by



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the time Dred Scott's case made it to the Supreme Court, those citizenship rights were as hotly contested as they ever had been.

Chief Justice Roger B. Taney clearly articulated his beliefs after the trial (emphasis mine):

In the opinion of the court, the legislation and histories of the times, and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show, *that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were then acknowledged as a part of the people, nor intended to be included in the general words used in that memorable instrument.*

It is difficult at this day to realize the state of public opinion in relation to that unfortunate race, which prevailed in the civilized and enlightened portions of the world at the time of the Declaration of Independence, and when the Constitution of the United States was framed and adopted. But the public history of every European nation displays it in a manner too plain to be mistaken.⁸

Said another way, Justice Taney believed that the Declaration of Independence could apply only to citizens of the United States—people whose rights that Declaration was meant to protect. Taney would further argue that Black people were simply not the class of people meant to be protected by this document.

They had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race. It was regarded as an axiom in morals as well as in politics,

which no one thought of disputing, or supposed to be open to dispute; and men in every grade and position in society daily and habitually acted upon it in their private pursuits, as well as in matters of public concern; without doubting for a moment the correctness of this opinion.⁹

Within eighty years, enslaved people like Elizabeth Freeman had gone from being able to use the words of a document similar to the Declaration of Independence in arguing for freedom, to being considered by court opinion not to be due those rights because they were not—nor could they ever be—citizens of the country where they labored.

It is so important to put Elizabeth's actions into the context of what would take place in the nation long after she had died. Her self-advocacy was the first in a long line of steps that would reveal the blatant hypocrisy of chattel slavery's existence in the "land of the free." It would also serve to illustrate the shift of the nation from one that realized slavery could not coexist with notions of liberty and freedom to one that would fight for slavery at the cost of the Union.

What Mum Bett Taught Me

Those seeds that Elizabeth planted would sprout into a history-making legacy of advocacy. She used the knowledge at her disposal—the Sheffield Declaration—to vie for her freedom. Though not a well-educated woman because of her life circumstances, she was obviously intelligent enough to know her rights and petition for them.

This millennial has a lot to learn from her foremother on that score. If a woman who was systematically barred from education and advancement can use a snatch of a document that she overheard in conversation to stand up for her rights, what excuse do I—a twenty-first-century woman with unlimited

education and information at my fingertips—have for *not* acting on my own behalf and the behalf of others?

Mum Bett is quoted as saying, “Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute’s freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it—just to stand one minute on God’s airth a free woman—I would.”¹⁰

Elizabeth set an important precedent through her “freedom suit.” She showed, as thousands who followed after her would show, the blatant hypocrisy of a nation that claimed that freedom was a God-given right and yet denied it to many on the basis of their skin color. She held her master accountable for his abuse of power—and she won.

There is power in knowing what our founding fathers described as our “inalienable rights.” Elizabeth Freeman knew them when she was petitioning for her freedom, and we would do well to know them as we inhabit our modern lives. Just a few overheard words from the Sheffield Declaration changed the course of Elizabeth’s life, and history as a whole; how much more can our understanding of the wealth of words penned about our invaluable rights change our own lifetimes?

This legacy sounds intimidating when painted in such heroic strokes, but, looking at the rest of Elizabeth’s life, we see that her faithfulness was lived out in the day-to-day. That court appearance was just one aspect of who she was.

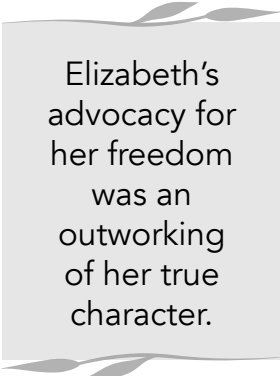
Elizabeth wasn’t a brilliant Civil Rights lawyer who spent her entire life advocating for legislative change. She was a domestic worker and a midwife who spent most of her time serving others and, according to her headstone, keeping her word. That part of her life—the part where she was faithful every day—is something I relate to much more than the freedom suit.

Look back at the words on her headstone: *She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty.*

She was a good steward of her time and her belongings. She was trustworthy. She applied herself diligently to every duty. In this sense, her advocacy for her freedom is not the defining characteristic of her life but an *outworking* of her true character. Elizabeth Freeman is not merely memorable because of her court case; rather, she is memorable because she had the type of character that made her a good steward of the freedom she had been given by God, giving her an understanding that she was not merely property. She never violated the contract that all citizens of this country pledged allegiance to, and did not neglect to perform her duty as one of the shapers of the nation that we now reside in.

Elizabeth Freeman wasn't a trailblazing activist. And yet, I believe that it was because Elizabeth herself was a woman of her word and a woman of principle that she could not sit idly by while her nation reneged on the contract that it had made with its people, including its enslaved people.

That is an example I want to follow. A woman who is faithfully about her work each and every day, but willing to step outside of that work and outside of her comfort zone to hold a nation or an individual accountable. A woman who advocates every day on a small scale—for myself, my husband, my children, my loved ones—and isn't afraid to advocate on a larger scale when the occasion calls for it.



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Elizabeth's Rights

Little is known about Elizabeth Freeman outside of the details of this trial. As far as we know, in her eighty-five years on this earth, she never did learn to read or write. Would that she had

learned, as her contemporary Phillis Wheatley did, to hold a pen and share her thoughts. (There can only be one Phillis Wheatley, of course, but even a journal entry would do.)

But the beautiful thing about Elizabeth's story is that, whatever her personal beliefs may have been, her advocacy is an example of a truth we see often in Scripture:

Learn to do what is good.
Pursue justice.
Correct the oppressor.
Defend the rights of the fatherless.
Plead the widow's cause.

Isaiah 1:17

This is what the LORD says: Administer justice and righteousness. Rescue the victim of robbery from his oppressor. Don't exploit or brutalize the resident alien, the fatherless, or the widow. Don't shed innocent blood in this place.

Jeremiah 22:3

The LORD of Armies says this: "Make fair decisions. Show faithful love and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the resident alien or the poor, and do not plot evil in your hearts against one another."

Zechariah 7:9–10

We serve a God who advocates for the weak—for widows, for orphans, and for sojourners. We serve a God who condemns the manstealing that was the basis for slavery in the United States (Exodus 21:16). We serve a God who cares for those our culture routinely overlooks, unjustly rejects, or unfairly marginalizes.

Whatever Elizabeth's standing before our God, she understood at least part of his heart for his people on earth: that we would render true judgment, show kindness and mercy, and

stand against oppression. Theodore Sedgwick, the man she worked for once she was free until the day she died—the man who helped her attain freedom—was said to be a Christian, and I hope that even though Elizabeth could not read the words of the Bible herself, she knew the God who made her for freedom, and that her earthly freedom pales in comparison to the freedom she knows with him in eternity.

Elizabeth and Me

I am still learning what it means to be a woman and an advocate.

Sometimes, it seems that our Christian ideals of femininity prize timidity over strength, placidity over courage, and docility over principle. But we have to remember that our culture has a way of shaping the Word of God to fit into our own ideals of what truly shapes a woman of God. Esther advocated for Israel with her husband, the king. Ruth advocated for herself with her future husband, Boaz. Deborah advocated for Israel as their judge.

And Elizabeth Freeman advocated for her freedom from the ungodly institution of American slavery and spent the rest of her life advocating for mothers who were bringing their babies into the world.

That part of the story is one of my favorites, because for me, advocacy looks like following in Elizabeth Freeman's footsteps in the birth field. It looks like learning all that I can about the history of gynecology and its adverse effects on Black women's bodies, as well as the modern-day attitudes and assumptions about Black health in general and Black maternal health specifically that lead to disparities in outcomes. It looks like knowing my rights when I enter a hospital and being able to advocate for my rights and the rights of my child. It means seeking as much education as I can to someday become a doula and advocate for the rights of other women.

Here's what I love: we don't all have to fight on the same front. We need midwives and doulas—we need educators, legislators, prison reformers, police reformers, wives, mothers, and sisters all on the front lines. As we strive to be faithful in whatever space the Lord has for us, *this* is the kind of strength that I love about Black women.