

Elizabeth

(1766–11 June 1866),

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former slave, and itinerant Methodist minister, was born in Maryland and apparently never used a surname. Elizabeth did not relate the names of her parents or her siblings in the memoir she dictated at one hundred years of age. She did, however, reveal that her parents belonged to a Methodist Society and she recalled that every Sabbath morning from the time she was five until she was eleven years old her father read the Bible aloud to her and the rest of their family. At the age of eleven she was separated from her family when her owner sold her or her services to another plantation twenty or more miles away. Elizabeth ignored her overseer's instructions and visited her mother and family. Inconsolable over the separation from her family, her mother advised Elizabeth that she had “nobody in the wide world to look to but God” (*Elizabeth*, 4). She recalled that those words echoed in her head again and again: “none but God in the wide world.” Upon returning to her owner's farm, “I found the overseer was displeased at me for going without his liberty. He tied me with a rope, and gave me some stripes, of which I carried the marks for weeks” (*Elizabeth*, 3). For six months she fell into deep depression until she experienced a prolonged religious crisis that resulted in greater faith and courage to endure her enslavement. Elizabeth's memoir is largely silent on her experiences in slavery and mentions no names and few locations or dates of events, dwelling mostly on her religious faith and experiences as a self-appointed itinerant minister. She did, however, reveal that at some point she was sold to a Presbyterian who did not fully believe in slavery and gave Elizabeth her freedom when she turned thirty. Sometime thereafter, she held her first religious meeting in the home of a “poor widow” in Baltimore. Other black women attended, which raised opposition in the community and attempts to halt Elizabeth's services. After some discussions with church elders, a male representative attended her meetings and for several years she was able to continue her “ministry.”

Elizabeth's services increasing attracted local attention and larger crowds, including some local whites who had heard of Elizabeth's powerful sermons.

“At one of the meetings, a vast number of the white inhabitants of the place, and many colored people, attended—many no doubt front curiosity to hear what the old colored woman had to say. One, a great scripturarian, fixed himself behind the door with pen and ink, in order to take down the discourse in short-hand; but the Almighty Being anointed me with such a portion of his Spirit, that he cast away his paper and pen, and heard the discourse with patience, and was much affected, for the Lord wrought powerfully on his heart. After meeting, he came forward and offered me his hand, with solemnity on his countenance, and handed me something to pay for my conveyance home.”

(*Elizabeth*, 10)

Her fame spread and she held subsequent meetings in Maryland and in Virginia. Her sermons included condemnations of slavery, and it wasn't long before these attracted the attention of authorities who threatened to imprison her. What resulted from her antislavery sermons, she did not reveal. Elizabeth then traveled widely and for four years lived in Michigan, where she established a school for black students. She also traveled to Canada, holding well-attended services and often participating in Quaker meetings in her travels, perhaps mostly in Philadelphia where she died. During her last days in the summer of 1866, she found a Quaker willing to record her story and captured her last words and painful demise. "Through months of bodily anguish," her caregiver and amanuensis noted, "occasioned by gangrenous sores upon one of her feet, which extended from the toes to the knee, destroying in its terrible course all the flesh, leaving the bone bare and black," she continued to profess her unyielding faith. Her memoir, *A Colored Minister of the Gospel, Born in Slavery*, published by Philadelphia Quakers twenty-three years after Elizabeth's death, certainly speaks to the Quaker notion of the inner light. Moreover its equalitarian message and defense of a woman's right to speak and preach comported well with Quaker thinking and practice. Once, in Virginia, after delivering a sermon that included a condemnation of slavery, whites confronted her and demanded to know by what authority she spoke (if she was an ordained minister). She responded "if the Lord had ordained me, I needed nothing better" (*Elizabeth*, 10-11).

Further Reading

Elizabeth. *Elizabeth, A Colored Minister of the Gospel, Born in Slavery* (1889). Available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/eliza2/eliza2.html>. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/eliza2/eliza2.html>>

Elizabeth. "Memoir of Old Elizabeth A Coloured Woman, in Six Women's Slave Narratives," ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988).

See also

Methodist Church <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-44884>>

Slave Narratives <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-44404>>

Slavery <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-45025>>