

# THE MYSTICISM OF HARRIET TUBMAN MADE THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

*Joshua Norman*

The basic details of the life of Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) are well known to almost every American. For most people, she was the brave formerly enslaved person who led daring missions to free others still trapped in bondage. What is not widely discussed is the deeply mystical dimensions of her spirituality that helped her flourish during a dark time in history.

Tubman's mysticism took a few forms. She did not believe in an impersonal Christian Divinity high in the clouds and out of touch. Instead, her relationship with the Divine was deeply personal, for she believed she was in direct contact with a Divinity who lent an unmediated hand in guiding her through the many struggles and dangers in her escape from and fight against slavery. Additionally, her visions, trances, prophetic intuitions, and unwavering reliance on direct spiritual guidance place her within a long lineage of religious mystics whose inner lives shaped their outward missions.

Her first biographer, Sarah Bradford, in her 1886 book *Harriet, The Moses of Her People*, wrote about her spirituality: "She seemed ever to feel the Divine Presence near, and she talked with God [the Divine]

'as a man [person] talketh with his [their] friend.'"

For Tubman, it wasn't just council that the Divine gave her; she believed she got direct help from the Divine.

In her recent book *Night Flyer*, about Tubman's spiritual life, author Tiya Miles wrote that "Harriet believed that God

[the Divine] guided and shielded her." Miles also wrote that "through her openness to sources of knowledge that we might view as extraordinary today and her conviction that, with God's [the Divine's] guidance, she had the power to alter outcomes, Harriet Tubman became formidable."

To understand Tubman fully is to recognize that her abolitionist actions were inseparable from her inner spiritual life. Her daring rescues, her resilience, and her uncanny ability to evade capture were rooted in a spiritual worldview that blurred the lines between the material and the unseen.

In addition to her spiritual mysticism, she had a deeply personal connection with nature that enabled her many feats of daring on the Underground Railroad. Miles wrote:



*Harriet Tubman, age 43-46, ca. 1866-1868, in a colorized image.*





*Harriet Tubman, far left, with family and neighbors, some of whom she helped escape slavery, ca. 1885, at her home in Auburn, NY, in a colorized image.*

Important, too, in the Black Women’s faith culture that Tubman practiced was God’s [the Divine’s] work in and through nature. Tubman’s relationship with God [the Divine] and her pursuit of his [Its] will unfolded in living ecological contexts—upon and among the changing lands, waters, and residents of the natural world—South and North.

From a young age, Tubman experienced what she described as visions and dreams that she interpreted as messages from the Divine. These experiences intensified after a traumatic head injury she suffered as a teenager at the hands of a slave overseer—an injury that left her with seizures and lifelong episodes of sudden sleep and vivid dream states. Rather than diminishing her, this injury seems to have opened what she interpreted as a channel to direct communication with the Divine.

Miles wrote: “Harriet’s creed of holistic freedom was one that she had negotiated, or co-created through communion, with this god [Divinity] of her belief. . . . She learned not only that God [the Divine] sided with the oppressed but also that

God [the Divine] would respond when she spoke to him [It].”

Biographer Bradford, who spoke with Tubman directly for her book, wrote that Tubman dreamed of her escape from slavery before actually fleeing for the North: “She used to dream of flying over fields and towns, and rivers and mountains, looking down upon them ‘like a bird,’ and reaching at last a great fence, or sometimes a river, over which she would try to fly.”

When Tubman made the daring decision to flee her servitude in Maryland in 1849, she sang before leaving that she was “bound for the promised land.” The exact route of her journey has been lost to time, but in all her travels she said it was the Divine’s hand guiding her forward, and it was the Divine who endowed that promise of freedom.

According to Bradford: “She is the most shrewd and practical person in the world, yet she is a firm believer in omens, dreams, and warnings. . . . She declares that when she came North she remembered these very places as those she had seen in her dreams, and many of the ladies who

befriended her were those she had been helped by in her vision.”

This reliance on and importance of dreams and visions for Tubman, besides being deeply mystical, was part of a continuing spiritual tradition within the African American community. Miles wrote:

The quality of her dreams and visions, represented as prophetic by Tubman herself and by her peers, was not unique. The other Black “holy” women [of her era] also heard voices, saw visions, had fainting spells or blackouts, communed with spirits they took to be God [the Divine], Jesus [Yeshua], or angels, and acted on these experiences in ways that sometimes shocked their contemporaries.

Bradford wrote about a letter written by a friend of Tubman named “Garrett,” who was aware of the details of her escape from slavery: “I never met with any person, of any color, who had more confidence in the voice of God [the Divine], as spoken direct to her soul. She has frequently told me that she talked with God [the Divine], and He [It] talked with her every day of her life. . . . She had a guide within herself other than the written word, for she never had any education.”

Such language places Tubman within a long tradition of mystical figures who claim direct communion with the Divine. Even one of the most famous civil rights writers of her era, W.E.B. Dubois, described her as having “wild, half-mystic ways,” according to biographer Miles. Her spirituality was experiential rather than book-based, grounded in lived encounters rather than theological speculation.

Something else that aligns Tubman with many other mystics is that her visions translated directly into action. Her spirituality did not lead to contemplative

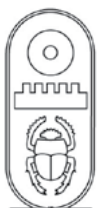
withdrawal; it was a catalyst for resistance. After she struggled to gain personal freedom, Tubman’s spirituality led her back to the South again, believing she should help free others. She told her biographer:

I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter, with the old folks, and my brothers and sisters. But to this solemn resolution I came: I was free, and they should be free also. I would make a home for them in the North, and the Lord helping me, I would bring them all there. Oh, how I prayed then, lying all alone on the cold, damp ground; “Oh, dear Lord,” I said, “I have no friend but you. Come to my help, Lord, for I’m in trouble!”

During her many lonely and scary nights ferrying people to freedom along the Underground Railroad, Tubman both took solace in prayer and used it as a means to communicate directly with the Divine for instruction. Bradford wrote: “She expected deliverance when she prayed,



*William H. Johnson, Harriet Tubman, ca. 1945.*



unless the Lord had ordered otherwise, and in that case she was perfectly willing to accept the Divine decree.”

Modern biographer Miles wrote that Tubman likely saw herself as a vessel for Divine will. When she learned of the execution of the famed abolitionist John Brown, Miles wrote that Tubman said “it was God [the Divine] in him” that caused Brown to be so righteous and brave until the end. “She saw John as a person very much like herself, a spiritual sibling acting on behalf of God [the Divine] and through whom God [the Divine] acted,” Miles wrote.

This belief gave her extraordinary resilience. If her mission was divinely ordained, then fear became secondary to obedience. Believing that she was under Divine protection, she was able to take risks that others might have found impossible. This mindset is characteristic of many mystical traditions, where union with the Divine dissolves the boundaries of individual limitation.

While Tubman’s beliefs were deeply personal, they were also connected to a broader spiritual community. Enslaved African Americans often shared stories of visions, signs, and divine intervention. “Harriet believed that God [the Divine] guided and shielded her, a view she shared with other women of her faith tradition,” Miles wrote. “She was behaving in ways her family and local community members would have recognized and understood.” This communal validation reinforced her confidence in her experiences. She was not alone in her worldview; she was part of a tradition that honored the mystical.

In addition to comforting her personally and guiding her directly, Tubman’s mysticism expressed itself as a form of resistance. Slavers regularly misinterpreted the Bible to justify their inhumane practice, so believing in a



*Harriet Tubman in 1895, in a colorized image.*

Divinity that helped her directly along the Underground Railroad was an affirmation of her autonomy and dignity. If she could personally hear the Divine’s voice, then no earthly authority could claim absolute power over her.

Harriet Tubman’s legacy is often told in terms of bravery and leadership, but these qualities cannot be separated from her mystical spirituality. Her visions, dreams, and belief in a personal connection with the Divine were not peripheral—they were central to her identity and her actions.

Through the lens of her biographers, we see a woman who lived at the intersection of the visible and invisible worlds. Her faith was not abstract belief but lived experience, guiding her through danger and uncertainty. Tubman stands as a reminder that mysticism is not always quiet or withdrawn. In her case, it was practical and transformative. It enabled her to navigate perilous landscapes, inspire others, and ultimately reshape history. For Tubman, the mystical was not an escape from reality—it was a deeper engagement with it, a source of strength that made the impossible possible.