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MARIA JONES: HER HISTORY IN AFRICA AND THE WEST INDIES.

“If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”

MARIA was born in Africa. Her parents lived on the western coast, and there, while she was playing one day in the bush, not far from their hut, she was seized by some of those wretches who steal and sell their fellow men for slaves, as put on board a slave ship, and went to the island of St. Vincent, in the West Indies. She was then only eleven years old, but when she was seventy she remembered well the event, and also many circumstances of her infant years. On arriving at the island of St. Vincent, she was sold to the captain of a small trading vessel, as his slave. For a length of time she was sullen and intractable. She had been free and happy, and felt deeply the misery of being thus torn from her parents, and deprived of liberty. When, however, her master was from home, she was [...some] and sportive, like most children of her age, but was always severely punished for it on his return. She had a very high spirit, which was not easily subdued; and indeed, was never entirely tamed, till it was humbled by the grace of God. All through her life of slavery she showed much strength & independence of mind, and would often utter sentiments and feelings which proved that she did not willingly submit to the yoke imposed upon her.

For a few years she remained the unprofitable slave of her first owner, but was afterwards sold to a Trinidad planter, and was placed with his other negroes on the Palmiste estate, and driven with them to her daily toil in the cane piece. The manager of the estate was a young Scotchman, who was just commencing his career as a planter. At an after period, when brought to know God, she would often contrast her condition with his; she, a worn-out negress, destitute, after a life of unrequited toil, of any provision for old age while he, in the same period, from the humblest beginning, had risen to possess several valuable sugar plantations; but then she would add, “I more rich than he for a’ dat; he, poor, blind buckra sinner, while Father make me rich for ever.” This man was not very cruel. He saw in Maria a noble independence of character not often found in oppressed slaves, and relieved her from the labour of the cane piece to employ her in washing and other domestic duties. He may have been led to do so, in part, lest she should produce a similar spirit to her own in the whole gang of slaves. While it was confined to one, he was in no way alarmed; and he often permitted her to talk to him in a manner which he would not allow in general, as being incompatible with slavery. Maria was not, however, the worse slave because she was an honest, independent, out-spoken person. She was addicted to most of the vices of the system, but was nevertheless faithful and constant in the performance of the duties assigned her, and on this account was better liked than others of her class, who, while they concealed their abhorrence of slavery, were often detected in low cunning and scheming to deceive the overseer. To such a course Maria seldom stooped. From the Palmiste estate Maria was, in the course of time, transferred to Mount Pleasant, in the northern part of the island. It was there she was emancipated in 1838, after a life of slavery; and there she still lived in 1848, in the enjoyment, not only of temporal, but of spiritual liberty. It was there that she first enjoyed sound religious instruction. This was wonderfully blessed to her, and wrought a remarkable change in her life. At the date of emancipation a school was opened by the Mico Charity, on the Mount Pleasant estate, where poor Maria resided, for the instruction of the negroes in that neighbourhood. The pupils were from six years old to sixty; and among the most aged and infirm, and apparently unpromising, was Maria.

Curiosity brought many to witness the operations of a school for “nigger,” as well as to see the “buckra gentleman who came so far for teach ‘em.” But while many simply looked, and laughed at what they considered “buckra’s” foolish attempt “to make nigger know book,” Maria was alive to the kindness

of these efforts, and resolve that, whatever others did, she would avail herself of them to improve herself all she could. Accordingly, at the age of sixty years, with her head white and her eye dim, she presented herself to the teacher to learn the alphabet. Having taken the first step, she did not go back from her purpose, nor grow weary of learning, as many negroes do. Her energy of mind secured closeness of application and perseverance, even at her advanced age, which has been rarely witnessed in younger negroes. As she limped forward to present herself to the teacher, he eyed her with surprise, thinking her a most unlikely pupil, and one from whom little credit could be expected for the labour bestowed. He did not like to reject or discourage her, however, but through he would gratify her for once, supposing she would soon tire of book-instruction. But he did not know Maria neither did any of those around her, who laughed at what they considered her folly in attempting to "larn book." She had a strong desire to know, and the more she learned the more she desired to learn. It is impossible to describe the eagerness with which she sought instruction, not only from the teacher, but any one she could press into her service. To make progress, was the grand business of her days and nights too. Not being able to engage in regular field labour, she had more time to give to it than many of her juniors; and it was no uncommon thing to see her as constantly in the day school among the children, as in the evening class with the adults. The instruction given in the evening-school was gratuitous; and when she first expressed a wish to attend the day-school also, the teacher told her that she must be satisfied with the measure of attention she received in the evening class, and not trouble him when he was engaged with the children. She was not however to be turned aside from her purpose; and in order fully to qualify herself for entering the day-school, she presented the teacher with the weekly sum of money usually [*sic*] paid by the day-scholars. He could no longer urge any objection to enrolling her name with those of the children; and no pupil had he so importunate and troublesome as she.

Long before school hour in the morning would Maria present herself, and although she would not press for a regular lesson till the business of the school commenced, she would nevertheless put questions innumerable to the teacher, chasing him from place to place, even to his chamber door. When she had him there, she would rest herself on the floor, and commence spelling or reading [it] herself, but seeking at the same time, an explanation of every word she did not fully comprehend.

She soon outstripped her class-mates in learning the alphabet, and other elementary lessons, and at length her noble ambition was in some measure gratified by beginning to read the New Testament. She had often heard the teacher read the Scriptures in the school, and her dark mind thus became gradually enlightened, and her hard heart impressed. Her soul became fired with an ardent desire to be able to read for herself these wonderful stories and sublime truths. Almost from the commencement of her course of instruction, she aimed at this; and never did she rest, till she had the happiness, with her own aged and dim eyes, to read the book of life. In order to perfect herself in this art, she would take under her arm her testament wherever she went, for miles around home, that if she met any persons who could instruct her she might get them to do so, or else read to any she might meet, who were unable to read themselves. She would invariably press upon the latter their duty to receive instruction, would place before them in the strongest light the advantages afforded them since freedom came for improving their minds, and in order to encourage them would dwell upon the gratification she herself had found in being able to read "good book."

The school-teacher, to whom reference has been made, was from Scotland, and connected with the Presbyterian church in Trinidad. His pastor, Mr. K-----, paid him occasional visits, and while there, generally preached to the negroes on the Mount Pleasant estate. Among those who attended on such occasions was Maria. The Lord had opened her heart by previous religious instruction, so that she gave heed to the things spoken at such times, and learned the way of God more perfectly.

The various means she enjoyed for religious improvement were so greatly blessed to her, that the moral and mental change produced, was visible to all. This change appeared first in the desire she expressed to be married, "after free fashion," to the man Jones, with whom for years she has lived as wife, according to the negro, or rather, slave custom [*sic*]. She made known her wish to the teacher, who made arrangements with the worthy minister referred to, so that the marriage took place soon afterwards, to the great delight of the aged bride. It was only a few days after this that Mr. Cowen, Baptist

Missionary in Trinidad, first saw Maria at a Sabbath school. She was pointed out to him by the teacher, as a most remarkable woman, quite an original character, of a strong, sound understanding. Mr. Cowen spoke to her, and received a hearty shake of the hand, and warm welcome, as a friend “come to show poor nigger what good.” She soon informed him of the change that had recently taken place in her condition, remarking at the same time, with evident pride, that now “she called Mrs. Jones, and not Maria, as before time.” This she said, purposely, in the hearing of several other females present, turning to them as she spoke, as though anxious to improve the occasion by provoking them to go and do likewise. She seemed to move among them like a queen, as though conscious of some superiority over them in point of character. Mrs. Cowen was greatly struck with her at this first interview; and continued to admire her in an increased degree, as he saw her progress in grace, under the sanctifying teaching of the Spirit of God.

For several years she maintained a holy walk in connection with the Presbyterian church, Port of Spain, into which she was received shortly after her marriage. Though living at the distance of fourteen miles from the place of worship, yet aged and crippled as she was, she rarely absented herself from communion with the church; and when enjoying those seasons, her joy was peculiarly great. In order to be present on such occasions, and other previous gatherings of the members for prayer, she would leave her home early in the week, and spend the time of her stay in town in visiting Christian people, in whose society she now delighted. Early in the following week she would return to her home, rejoicing in the Lord. On these occasions she never omitted to visit Mr. Cowen. She would generally drop in about the time of family worship, morning and evening, when she must have a lesson also in her Testament, which she had ever at hand, go where she would. On morning when she was there for worship, there was present also a female member of the Baptist church at Port of Spain. With the latter, Mr. Cowen entered into a short conversation, in which Maria seemed much interested. When this friend had left, Maria inquired if she were a Baptist? Mr. Cowen said she was. “I should like to know somtin about dis batist,” she said; “What it mean?” adding, “How you never tell me noting about dis batist!” He said, “Maria, perhaps I should have told you something about it; but you know I have told you about something of greater importance, even about Jesus Christ, who came into the world to save sinners.” “Yes,” she said, “but I like for hear of batist mo.” “Well,” he said, “you have your Testament with you, and I will make it tell you all I know about it myself.” “Eh! Eh!” said she, “how dat?” expressing thereby her surprise that she had never seen it in her reading. After he had pointed out several passages of scripture to her, which she read most carefully and with deep attention, she was still more surprised, but said little. On these passages her eyes never before rested. “How come I no see dem fore dis?” she said, several times to herself; “how come dem never show me dis?” referring to the Christian friends with whom she stood connected. Mr. Cowen said but little, wishing rather than the truths she had read, might operate upon her heart, and have all the glory. He knew, moreover, her honest, candid nature; how sincerely she was devoted to the Saviour, and attached to her excellent pastor. She loved most ardently the church with which for years she had been united; and nothing but the authority of her Saviour’s words, dealing with her conscience, could separate her from them. But Mr. Cowen knew she would honour the truth, and therefore contented himself with simply bringing her mind into contact with the scriptures in her own Testament, that she might read them with her own eyes. And this was done at her own request, to give her as brief and satisfactory an explanation as possible of the views of Baptists. At the close of this conversation, or rather scripture reading, Maria left, and Mr. Cowen saw no more of her for two months, when she came as usual to commune with her church, and during her stay she called on him as at other times. She said that since she had last seen him, she “hab no rest; she read plenty time dem places he show her, and somtin seem for take her by de hand, an say, *Come, Maria, batise same fashion as blessed Saviour.*” She said, moreover, that she wished to be immersed, and asked him if he would do it. He advised her to think and pray further on the subject, and also to open her mind regarding it to her minister, that she might have the advantage of his counsel, and said that if, in the end, she desired immersion, he would attend to it. He said, also, that probably her minister would immerse her himself, Mr. Cowen having heard him say on one occasion, that he would immerse adults, if requested; and he begged her to propose it to him before applying to himself again. To all this she attended. She opened her mind to her minister, whom she greatly esteemed, and pressed him to immerse her “same fashion as Jesus he own self.” The good man said he would have done

so, had he never baptized her, but that if he were now to immerse her, after sprinkling her some years before, it would be baptizing her *twice*, which would be wrong. But this sort of reasoning did not satisfy Maria's honest and practical turn of mind; her heart was set on "Massa Jesus" as her bright example in *this*, as in other respects, and much as she loved her minister, she loved her Saviour more, even as Mary of old. She therefore returned to Mr. Cowen, repeating and pressing, with increased urgency, her former request. He begged her, however, to let the matter stand over for two months longer, till she next came to town, when, if she still desired it, he promised to baptize her. At the end of this time Maria was firm, as at the first, in her resolve to honour the Saviour whom she loved so ardently. Mr. Cowen reminded her that he had used no sort of personal influence to produce this change of sentiment. She clasped her hands, raised her eyes to heaven, and said, "No it my blessed Saviour, it Fader, it him, it him; he ebry ting for me. O what him do for me; what him do for me heart ebry day, no one know but myself; he do for me what nobody can do; it him I love more dan all; him I want for 'bey. Me no batise for please you, nor for vex nobody; me love me minister plenty, he teach me good ting, when me know notin 'tall: but me love blessed Saviour more dan all, me want for go same way he go, for do same ting he do; me never yet *go down into de water* for batise same fashion he go, 'cause me not know it for do. Now me know if for do, me must do it; me have no rest till me *come up out of de water* same way he own self." Mr. Cowen's feelings were strongly moved by this simple and sincere expression of the motives by which she was prompted. He found that the truth had had the effect anticipated, and that she was now restless till she honoured it. Mr. and Mrs. Cowen walked through the town with this devoted disciple, to the water side; and there is the presence of a crowd of spectators, she was "buried with Christ by baptism," rejoicing that she had such an opportunity to testify her affection for him who endured for her the reproach and sufferings of the cross. "There," said she, as she came from the water, "I batize *four* time now, but only one time right! 'Fore dem tief me in Africa, dem priests dere do somtin for batize; when me come to buckra country, dem Catholic priests" – for Maria was originally a Roman catholic – "do what dem call baptism; dem put oil on my head, salt in me mout, and make cross on me face; but now me read bible for me own self, me no find dis dere. When me join Cotch church, dem take me 'gain and *prinkle* water in me face for batist, but neder dis right, when me come for know better; no more one way, same fashion blessed Saviour he self do; he go right down in de water, and come up 'gain same way me do now. O! tankee, Fader, for show me dis 'fore me go fra here for good."

Of Maria Jones, it might in all truth be said, that after she came up out of the water, she "went on her way rejoicing." She was subsequently received into fellowship by the Baptist church at Port of Spain, where she remains ripening for glory, honour, immortality, and eternal life, through her crucified and risen Lord.