



Octavia V. Rogers Albert

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Exposing the Evils of Slavery

by Victoria McAfee

As a Christian author and researcher, Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert desired to bring to light the atrocities of slavery. Albert put her pen to paper in the 1800s, when black women authors were rarities in this arena. It was a time in history when those responsible for slavery attempted to make something inhuman human. In her writing, Albert boldly exposed the cruelties of slavery and the injustices blacks still felt after the Civil War. She took on this task like a missionary answering God's call, pioneering her way through uncharted territory. Through her writings, she projected the voice of the ex-slave.

Albert was born in Oglethorpe, Georgia, to parents who were slaves until their emancipation. The exact date of her birth is uncertain, but it was probably around 1853. In 1870, she enrolled in the Atlanta University after the Civil War. Three years later she began teaching in Montezuma, Georgia.

While in Georgia, she met another teacher, A. E. P. Albert, and they married in 1874. She joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Oglethorpe, Georgia, under the ministry of former Congressman and political activist Henry M. Turner. However, shortly after their marriage, her husband became an ordained minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and he baptized her when the couple moved to Houma, Louisiana in 1877. *The Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage* says that like many of her contemporaries, Albert viewed her teaching "as a form of worship and Christian service," and those who knew her described her as a woman with "strong religious faith."

In Louisiana, the couple used their home as a place to teach blacks to read and write. Their home also became a place to receive a good meal, and many ex-slaves heard there the comforting words of Scripture. Albert encouraged them to tell their stories and share about the agony of other slaves who were now long gone. She later wrote about the time of slavery, "Consider that here in this Bible land, where we have the light, where the Gospel was preached Sunday after Sunday in all portions of the South, and where ministers read from the pulpit that God had made of one blood all nations of men, etc., that nevertheless, with the knowledge and teachings of the word of God, the slaves were reduced to a level with the brute. The half was never told concerning this race that was in bondage nearly two hundred and fifty years."

Most of Albert's stories centered around the life of Aunt Charlotte Brooks, who was brought from Virginia to Louisiana to be sold as a slave there. Her mother and brothers and sisters were left behind, and Charlotte never saw them again. When she came to Louisiana Charlotte was not a Christian, but she prayed like she had heard her mother praying. Her master allowed her to visit another woman from Virginia named Aunt Jane on another plantation on Sunday afternoons. Jane could read and write and told Charlotte stories from the Bible. She also sang hymns such as "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," Those hymns and stories helped Charlotte through her horrible ordeals. Her master beat her weekly and often threw her in jail. She also had several babies by her master's son, but all died because she had to work in the field

and was unable to give them proper attention. At night, leeches almost bled her to death. But Aunt Jane would slip away to Charlotte's plantation at night and hold prayer meetings, and at one of those Charlotte accepted the Lord.

Here are some of the other stories Albert recorded:

- Richard and Betty were a married couple who was forced to separate and marry other people.
- Hattie delivered and buried her still-born baby out in the woods, only to return to her master and be beaten half to death.
- Sallie was forced to pick 150 pounds of cotton each day and was whipped when she got home at night.

Despite these hardships, Albert records in her book that these same slaves called the Bible their anchor and Christ their Rock in a weary land. Calling on Jesus spoke peace to their souls. Unlike their cruel and unreasonable masters, their heavenly Father wanted nothing from them but their hearts and devotion. Aunt Charlotte spoke about feasting on Jesus when she had no bread. Another former slave desired only to have the words of Scripture read to her on her deathbed—her last words were, "Glory be to God and the Lamb forever." One brother and sister reported they had better treatment as a result of their prayers. Many attributed the North winning the Civil War as a direct answer to years of prayer. Their Christian beliefs, the biblical stories, singing the songs of Zion, gave them daily strength. They looked forward to freedom from their miserable existence on earth and always anticipated their real home in heaven.

Albert's stories first appeared in columns for the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* newspaper, published by the Methodist Episcopal Church, from January to December 1890 after her death. When newspaper readers asked for more, that gave her husband and her only daughter, Laura, the encouragement to publish the stories as a book, *The House of Bondage, or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves*.

Writers documenting the history of slavery in the United States before the Civil War admit that all the stories of what happened will never be told. However, Albert joined ranks with those who tried. Some estimate that she wrote over 200 accounts, but her book only chronicles the lives of around 15 people. *The Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* says she collected these stories to "correct and create history." Surely the Holy Spirit guided her hand as she spilled out the unimaginable, horrific pain of men and women for public display so their suffering will never be forgotten.

Albert concluded *The House of Bondage* with the hymn "The Song of Miriam" by Thomas Moore. She thanked God "that the unearthly institution [of slavery] has been swept away forever in a sea of blood never to rise again":

"Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea;
Jehovah has triumphed, his people are free!
Sing, for the pride of this tyrant is broken,
His chariots, his horsemen, all splendid and
brave—

How void was their boast, for the Lord hath but spoken
And chariot and horsemen are sunk in the wave.
Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea;
Jehovah has triumphed, his people are free!"



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