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Jasper, John

Daryl Cumber Dance

University of Richmond, ddance2@richmond.edu

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Jasper, John (1812–1901). Perhaps the most famous of all the slave preachers, John Jasper was born in Fluvanna County, Virginia, on July 4, 1812, the youngest of twenty-four children born to Phillip and Tina Jasper. His father, also a slave preacher, died two months before John was born, but he prophesied that his son would become a famous preacher.

In 1825 Jasper's master began hiring him out to a series of men in the Richmond area, where, for the most part, he worked in factories. He grew to be a strikingly handsome man who was very popular with the women. William Hatcher, a white pastor in Richmond who wrote the most authoritative biography of Jasper, relates that in his youth Jasper pursued the things of the flesh and the Devil until he experienced a dramatic conversion while he was stemming tobacco on his twenty-seventh birthday, July 4, 1839:

My sins was piled on me like mountains: my feet was sinkin' down to de regions of despair, an' I felt dat of all sinners I was de wust. I thought dat I would die right den, an' wid what I supposed was my las' breath I flung up to heaven a cry for mercy. 'Fore I knowed it, de light broke. (Hatcher, 25)

Jasper immediately rushed to tell an old woman who had been praying for his soul about his conversion. “[When I] started to whisper in her ear . . . de holing-back straps of [my] preachin' broke, an' what I thought would be a whisper was loud enough to be heard clean 'cross James River to Manchester.” This, Jasper declares, was his “first shout to de glory of my Redeemer” and the

beginning of his preaching (“dat day de Lord sent me out wid de good news of de kingdom”) (Hatcher, 25–26, 28).

Jasper, who began preaching throughout Virginia and adjoining states immediately after his conversion, had no formal education, having been taught to read and write by a fellow slave. His study of the Bible was so intense, however, that he is reputed to have been able to recite it from memory.

Jasper’s fame as a preacher is legendary. It is said that crowds followed him wherever he preached and that he preached every day of the week and two or three times on Sunday. (His owner was paid one dollar for every day he was absent from his job except Sunday.) Numerous observers reported that even white detractors who heard him broke down crying and begged him to come to preach to them again. Something of the charisma of this great folk figure is suggested in the following remarks of one of his parishioners:

Brer Jasper had a walk mighty remarkable. When he went in de streets he was so stately and grave like that he walk different from all de people. Folks would run out of all de stores or out on deir porches, or turn back to look when Jasper come ’long. Oh, it made us proud to look at him. No other preacher could walk like him. You felt de ground got holy where he went ’long. Some of ’em say it was equal to a revival to see John Jasper moving like a king ’long de street. Often he seemed to be wrapped up in his thoughts and hardly to know where he was. De people feared him so much, wid such a loving kind of fear, that they hardly dared to speak to him. (Hatcher, 81)

Hatcher also attests to his spellbinding presence: “His [word] pictures were simply himself in flame. His entire frame seemed to glow in living light and almost wordlessly he wrought his miracles” (Hatcher, 65).

On September 3, 1867, Jasper founded the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond on Brown’s Island. Originally the congregation worshipped in an abandoned Confederate horse stable. They moved into the present location at the corner of St. John and Duval streets in 1869. That structure was renovated and extended in 1925 and was, in 1996, placed on the National Register of Historic Places and on the Virginia Historic Landmarks Register.

In 1955, the church was slated for demolition along with more than 600 houses in the black neighborhood known as Jackson Ward. Protests resulted in the rescue of the historic church from destruction, although the community, including the home in which Jasper had lived, did not escape. The highway goes right around the church, literally cutting it off from much of the remaining community. The church is separated from the highway only by a massive wall that some have called the Walls of Jericho. Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church historian Benjamin C. Ross said that the city wanted to dig up Jasper’s grave, so the church dug him up and reburied him at Woodlawn Cemetery. It is also widely rumored that wood from Jasper’s home, demolished to construct Interstate 95, was used to make a gavel for the mayor of the city. Though Ross cannot verify that claim, he noted that several Richmond mayors have lifted the gavel and proclaimed that source.

Jasper's "the sun do move" sermon is the best known of all his sermons and the best known (and most controversial) of all early folk sermons. He is reputed to have delivered it 253 times between 1878 and 1901, and when it was rumored that he would be preaching it for the last time, 2,500 people packed into Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church to hear it on March 8, 1891. Surviving texts of that sermon are, of course, reconstructions. The best-known text of that sermon is by William Hatcher, in which he followed the tendency of his time to exaggerate black dialect. It is interesting to note that black novelist and former slave William Wells Brown was present on one occasion and wrote a detailed account of the famous sermon. He observed that "the more educated class of the colored people ... did not patronize Jasper. They consider him behind the times, and called him 'old fogy.'" Brown noted the venerable audience attending this sermon and the throngs who couldn't get in, but added, "These people had not come to be instructed, they had really come for a good laugh" (Brown, 204). Brown's accounts of passages of the speech are in Standard English, offering an interesting contrast to the heavy dialect of the Hatcher version, as can be seen in the brief passages below:

If the sun does not move, why did Joshua command it to "stand still?" Was Joshua wrong? If so, I had rather be wrong with Joshua than to be right with the modern philosophers. (Brown)

It say dat it wuz at de voice uv Joshwer dat it stopped. I don' say it stopt; tain't fer Jasper ter say dat, but de Bible, de Book uv Gord, say so. But I say dis; nut-hin' kin stop untel it hez fust startid. (Hatcher, 137-138)

Jasper frequently answered criticism about his theory regarding the sun, but he always justified it by citing biblical passages. News accounts of the day suggested that Jasper's unusual views of the solar system were well known in Europe, where they had received attention from scientists. While men of God and of science frequently argued vehemently against his teachings, the multitudes (elite and commoners, white and black) continued to swarm to hear him speak.

Jasper married four times and had nine children by his second wife and one stepchild by his third wife. He ended his life with words no less dramatic than those with which he had begun his career as a preacher. His last words were, "I have finished my work. I am waiting at the river, looking across for further orders."

Jasper's career has been documented in the impressive archives of the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, under the leadership of church historian Benjamin C. Ross. Pictures, items of clothing, pulpits from which he preached, and numerous other significant items are on display in the church's John Jasper Memorial Room.

Further Reading: Brown, William Wells, 1880, *My Southern Home, or The South and Its People* (Boston: A. G. Brown); Fluvanna County Historical Society, 2003, *De Sun Do Move: The Story of John Jasper* (Fluvanna County, VA: Fluvanna County

Historical Society); Harlan, Howard H., 1936, *John Jasper—A Case History in Leadership* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press); Hatcher, William E., 1908, *John Jasper: The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company); Randolph, E. A., 1884, *The Life of Rev. John Jasper, Pastor of Sixth Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Richmond, VA, from His Birth to the Present Time, with His Theory on the Rotation of the Sun* (Richmond, VA: R. T. Hill & Co., Publishers).

Daryl Cumber Dance