

Setting the Stage: John Eliot and the Algonquins of Eastern Massachusetts, 1646–90

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The restoration of the knowledge of the gospel to the Lamanites is a recurring prophecy in the Book of Mormon. Its fulfillment has occupied the attention of the Church ever since the fall of 1830, when Oliver Cowdery and four other missionaries left New York to proselytize among the Indians of present-day Kansas. Red tape and Protestant jealousies ended this first mission before any American Indians were baptized, but today, over 170 years later, several million people of Lamanite descent claim membership in the Church. The organization of the Church and its emphasis on missionary work were obvious prerequisites to the fulfillment of this prophecy, and scholars who have studied this fascinating chapter of Israel's redemption have rightfully focused their attention on the Latter-day Saint missions and missionaries who have played such a vital role in the story.¹

At the same time, however, most have neglected the fact that these missionaries have often built on the work of others; that is, missionaries of other faiths who had previously introduced American Indians to Christianity through the Bible. That these earlier efforts to teach Lamanite remnants about Christ were neither accidental nor unimportant is demonstrated by the prophet Nephi, who learned through vision and angelic tutoring that the latter-day restoration of Book of Mormon peoples to the gospel would involve “the book of the Lamb of God” going forth “from the Gentiles unto the remnant of the seed of my brethren,” after which “other books” would go forth that would “establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:38–40). In many areas

in the New World, this introductory work with the Bible started centuries before the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, but was clearly—if Nephi’s vision means anything—an important step toward these people’s eventual restoration to the fulness of the gospel. To discuss the redemption of the Lamanites only in terms of Latter-day Saint missionary efforts after 1830 is, in short, to miss half the story.

This paper is an effort to shed some light on this important, if somewhat neglected, phase of the restoration of the gospel to the Lamanites in the latter days. It focuses on the missionary efforts of the Puritan minister John Eliot, who worked with the Algonquins in eastern Massachusetts during the last half of the seventeenth century. As one of the first Europeans to make a sustained effort to teach Christianity to the Indians on American soil, Eliot wrote detailed accounts of his work and progress with the natives over several decades. His deeds and exploits inspired several generations of would-be missionaries that were sent to tribes living throughout North America. His narratives provide us with a wonderful glimpse into the sacrifices, difficulties, and successes that attended this first step toward the latter-day restoration of Book of Mormon peoples to the fulness of the gospel.

John Eliot

Little is known of Eliot’s early life—that he was born in England in 1604 is certain, but some doubt even remains as to which county he was born in and the status of his family. After earning his degree at Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1622, Eliot, who became good friends with the Reverend Thomas Hooker,² joined the exodus of Puritan divines from England in 1631. After serving as teacher of the First Church of Roxbury for a time, he was made that body’s pastor in 1633, a post he kept for the rest of his eventful life, which ended in 1690. Active in the proceedings against Anne Hutchinson,³ Eliot was known by his contemporaries as an honest, devout, zealous man, whose occasional idiosyncracies—he preached vehemently against the growing use of wigs, as well as against the evils of tobacco use—were more than offset by his almost boundless charity.⁴

But it was his unceasing efforts to convert the American Indians of the surrounding countryside to Christianity that made Eliot

a household name for several generations of colonists. His interests in the Native Americans seem to have begun during the Pequot War in 1637,⁵ when he spoke so strongly against the colony's proceedings against the New England tribe that colonial officials branded him another Roger Williams⁶ and asked that he publicly recant. Ten years later, in the fall of 1646, he began instructing the natives living near Roxbury in the fundamentals of Christianity, motivated, as he told his friend and colleague Daniel Gookin, by his desire to glorify God, his "compassion and ardent affection" for the Indians, and his obligation to fulfill the "covenant and promise" New Englanders had made to their king to "communicate the gospel unto the native Indians."⁷

Once he began, there was no turning back for Eliot. Braving debilitating sicknesses, fatigue, weather, and hostile tribesmen, the "Apostle to the Indians," as he came to be known, prosecuted his designs until he was so feeble that the Honorable Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel to the Indians in New England and Parts Adjacent, which began funding his and similar efforts in 1649, was forced to find money with which to pay a servant to accompany him on his missionary forays into the New England countryside.⁸ Under his direction, fourteen "praying towns" were established, where American Indians seeking Church membership could live apart from their unconverted brethren and practice the arts of civilization, community, and Christianity. Colonial jealousies and suspicions during King Philip's War⁹ wreaked havoc on the praying towns, and only four of the towns were inhabited by the time hostilities were over. Eliot persevered, however, and by 1687 most of the eighteen congregations of praying American Indians in New England were on the mainland, as were three of the six established American Indian churches. Some have estimated that five thousand natives in the region had embraced Christianity to one degree or another by this time—fully one quarter of the estimated twenty thousand American Indians living in New England and her adjoining islands at the time.¹⁰ By the turn of the century, Increase Mather reported that the number of established American Indian congregations in the area had swelled to "thirty several," many of which were holding midweek lectures as well as Sabbath meetings.¹¹

Eliot had some help in bringing all this about. One of his closest friends and staunchest allies was Daniel Gookin, who, four years after being elected a magistrate, was appointed by the Massachusetts Court to be superintendent of those American Indians in the colony who had submitted to English rule. In this capacity, Gookin frequently attended Eliot on his tours through the praying towns, and he stood alone among the magistrates in excoriating the colony's treatment of the Christian American Indians during King Philip's War. Through the use of interpreters, he became a well-respected lecturer to the American Indians and was quite popular with those among whom he worked.¹² Other ministers with whom Eliot occasionally coordinated his efforts included the younger John Cotton, son of the great Puritan divine by the same name, and Richard Bourne and William Leverich, who taught the Native Americans living around Sandwich and Mashpee in Plymouth Colony. Leverich had turned to the American Indians at Eliot's request after abandoning his English congregation to the "spirit of Pharisaisme and formality" that had overcome them.¹³ With Eliot prodding them on with stories of success around Roxbury and the Corporation in London encouraging them with what little financial benefits it could muster, these officials and ministers did much to advance the cause of the gospel among their Native American brethren.

English Opposition

One might think that these missionaries labored with their countrymen's blessing, but such was not the case. Within two years of the time Eliot regularly began meeting with the American Indians, English gainsayers were trying to discredit the work. Some, according to Thomas Shepard, "because they may thinke it too good newes to be true, . . . could hardly beleeve the reports they had received concerning these new stirs among the *Indians*." Others, intent on "maligning the good of the Countrey," actively sought to "vilifie" the work.¹⁴ Shepard entertained hopes that such doubts and charges would be dispelled from New England by the ministers who had gathered for the Synod at Cambridge and there witnessed the "great confluence" of Native Americans who had come from miles around to hear Eliot lecture. In this, however, he was

disappointed: Henry Whitfield, one of the compilers of the missionaries' reports and a New England minister himself, was still marveling years after the Synod at the "multitude of objections . . . darted against this pure piece of Christianitie" by many in the area—including "some," he wrote, "whom otherwise wee have charitable thoughts of."¹⁵ Some colonists, according to one bemused observer, even went so far as to "publiquely affirme, that there was no such thing as the preaching and dispersing of the Gospell amongst the Natives in *New England*." Others, while admitting the work went on, nevertheless maintained "low thoughts" of it and doubted its ultimate success, arguing from various events that God Himself at times seemed opposed to it.¹⁶ To stem such reports, the missionaries were asked by the Corporation in England to furnish them with the exact number of converts in the region.¹⁷

These "low thoughts" seem to have been largely a result of English suspicions concerning the American Indians. Many questioned the sincerity of the American Indians' conversion during these perilous times, when Massachusetts faced threats from both American Indians and other Europeans. In the heat of the first Anglo-Dutch War, for example, missionary work noticeably suffered because so many colonists believed the rumor that the "Praying Indians" had converted merely as a means to conspire with other American Indians and the Dutch against the English.¹⁸ Shepard knew of some who felt the American Indians converted simply "to please the *English*, and for applause from them," and others accused them of converting simply "for the loaves," meaning the gifts the missionaries gave many American Indians who converted. Richard Mather, partly in an attempt to dispel these and similar doubts, had Eliot record a number of American Indians' confessions of their conversion, hoping that their "many expressions savoring of their clear sight and sence of sin" might allay any fears.¹⁹

Others, Mather thought, were just as suspicious of the missionaries' sincerity, fearing that all the hooplah about Christian Indians was a device and design to get money from them. Mather's identification of money as a sticking point for many was well founded. Shortly after the Restoration, Robert Boyle, governor of the Corporation for Propagating the Gospel, wrote the missionaries concerning some who, "against all justice and equity," had managed to tie up

the majority of the Corporation's funds in hopes of undermining it completely. King Charles II's decision to recharter the company saved it, but it was clear to all involved that many resented the money being spent on behalf of the missionaries.²⁰

The "suspicious jealousies, hard speeches, and unkindnesses of men, touching the sincerity and reallity of this work" simmered until 1675, when the outbreak of King Philip's War brought it to fever pitch.²¹ Citing their concern for the safety of both the colonists and the American Indians, the Massachusetts General Court eventually exiled some five hundred Christian Indians to Deer Island in Massachusetts Bay, where they survived the remainder of the war on clams and other shellfish.²² Their treatment was relatively benign, however, compared to that given others. Not only were wigwams destroyed and food caches burned, but several colonists, whose latent suspicions flared up with each burning barn, threatened several Praying Indians with death. On at least two occasions, according to Gookin, who chronicled the Native Americans' plight, the colonists made good their threat. One particular congregation, with a murdered child and several wounded women, fled for Canada.²³

Most remarkable about the Praying Indians' treatment is that, aside from the missionaries, very few of the English seemed to consider their Christianity as grounds for better treatment. Gookin, as the American Indian superintendent, was one of the exceptions and the only magistrate to side with ministers on this point. Arguing that this was a war of Christians, both English and American Indian, against the "profane and brutish heathen," both he and the missionaries defended the converts' loyalty so strongly and agitated for their fair treatment against the enmity, jealousy, and clamors of the colonists to such a degree that many began to question *their* loyalty. Few other colonists, however, outside several militia leaders who ferried various individuals off the island and profitably used them as scouts, saw the Christian Indians as anything special.²⁴ Some, indeed, seeing no difference between the American Indians on Deer Island and those against whom they were fighting, petitioned the General Court to have them all destroyed; others suggested deportation. And when the General Court finally decided the Praying Indians deserved better treatment than they had received, they did so because of the covenant the American Indians' ancestors had

made with the English in 1644 rather than for any consideration of their conversion to Christianity.²⁵ If it had been thinly veiled before, the average colonist's indifference and, at times, hostility to the missionaries' efforts and successes came into full view during the war.

The Indian in Sacred History

Eliot's liberality toward the Indians was due, at least in part, to his personal beliefs about their basic humanity and their history and the role he saw them playing in sacred history. In accordance with the numerous biblical passages that emphasize the ultimate brotherhood of mankind, Eliot and the others frequently referred to the Native Americans as nothing less than the sons of Adam or children of Adam, among whom lived many every bit as predestined to eternal salvation as the best of England's elect.²⁶ Holding the natives as "men of the same mould, [God's] offspring as well as we," these missionaries placed them squarely within the scheme of sacred history by identifying them as peoples discussed at length in the Bible, and so heirs to the blessings promised those groups. Most felt that America's native inhabitants were descendants of the Tartars or Scythians who lived in ancient times in northeast Asia and who had at some point in the murky past been "spilt by some revenging hand of God" onto America.²⁷ Their prophesied conversion to Christianity was perhaps to precede, perhaps to follow, the conversion of the Jews prior to the establishment of the kingdom of God on the earth.²⁸

Others, citing similarities between the traditions and religious beliefs of the biblical Hebrews and the Native Americans, argued that the American Indians actually belonged to the house of Israel and could even legitimately be called Jews themselves—an opinion that gained ground with some after Rabbi ben-Israel of Amsterdam endorsed it.²⁹ For John Eliot, it was "as clear in the Scripture, that these are the children of *Shem* as we of *Japhet*" and just as clear from more recent developments that the day of "these lost and scattered Israelites" had arrived—a thought that gave this frequently beleaguered missionary the strength to go on.³⁰ But whether Jew or Gentile, the American Indians of seventeenth-century New England were, in these Puritans' minds, as qualified for God's grace as any Englishman.

Rather than finding their charges short on any of humanity's basic characteristics, these ministers applauded the Native Americans' "rational souls" and made it clear that they found the American Indians at large to be "very ingenious, . . . very apt and quick of understanding." Youths at schools generally "came on very prettily," according to Eliot, and he was most impressed with the results of his attempts to instruct those who would be teachers in the rigors of formal logic and theology.³¹ Their abilities also applied to the spiritual realm; indeed, several ministers felt that many of the Native Americans who converted bested many churchgoing English in terms of spiritual refinement. Early on, Eliot had seen the mettle of Native American souls that so impressed his colleagues. After meeting with several Native Americans during his second visit to them in 1646, he wrote that he felt he was working with "such kinde of spirits" that would not easily relinquish the "mighty and blessed presence of the spirit of Heaven" that he was sure was already beginning to lodge in their hearts.³² Many ministers expressed their fears that the apparent decline in religious sensibilities among the English and the obvious spirituality of so many Native Americans indicated that God was perhaps choosing America as the seat of His kingdom rather than England, and several, including no less a dignitary than Governor John Endicott—who was himself impressed with the gravity and attentiveness of the American Indians he saw at one meeting—suggested that many thoughtful Englishmen might learn something about proper religious behavior from them.³³ Thomas Shepard, while not the most vociferous in this regard, nevertheless stated the ministers' case most succinctly, at the same time making it clear that they entertained no ideas of inherent English superiority: "I wish the like hearts and wayes [manifested in the Christian Indians] were seen in many *English* who professe themselves Christians," he wrote, "and that herein and many the like excellencies they were become *Indians*."³⁴

Depth of Conversion

Given the requirements of seventeenth-century Puritanism, Shepard's statement was a compliment of no mean proportions. Like other Christian faiths of the seventeenth century, Puritanism

demanded both the minds and hearts of its professors. An individual seeking full membership in the church not only had to demonstrate before a group of examining elders and members a sound understanding of both biblical doctrines and Puritan theology but also had to provide evidence that they had undergone a true conversion experience. The whole process took no small amount of study, prayer, and introspection—so much, in fact, that many Englishmen were not able to meet all the requirements, much to the concern of Puritan ministers. Yet despite the religious distance American Indian converts had to come, evidence suggests that many did successfully meet both the intellectual and spiritual requirements of honest-to-goodness conversion, while many others at any given time were well on their way to doing so.³⁵

We will, of course, never be able to know exactly how well Eliot's Native Americans comprehended Puritan theology and doctrine. It is clear, however, that due to the efforts of both the missionaries and the American Indians, there was no reason they could not have understood it very well. For one, the missionaries taught the Indians in their own language. This put the burden of working through the language barrier on the teachers rather than on the students, who were then free to concentrate on understanding the principles taught. Knowing what they wanted to teach to the Native Americans, the missionaries could search the Native American vocabularies for words whose meanings approximated those of the specialized religious terms they were using, and the missionaries were always free to illustrate the ideas they were teaching with examples familiar to the American Indians. The problems attending this practice were numerous, of course; many were forced to rely on interpreters to get their points across, and even Eliot, who eventually became quite proficient in the Native American tongue, complained that the language barrier forced him to teach using a different method than he did with his English congregation.³⁶ Yet the doctrine they learned, with its emphasis on the Creation, the Fall, original sin, and the redemption wrought by Christ, was precisely the same doctrine taught to English Puritans, and the extensive question-and-answer sessions the missionaries held with their students ensured that, notwithstanding the interpreters and innovative teaching methods, American Indian and missionary understood each other.³⁷

The decision to teach the American Indians in their own language met with stiff opposition from other Englishmen, some of it even coming from Eliot's supporters. Daniel Gookin, for example, frustrated with having to use an interpreter during his lectures to the American Indians at Natick, strongly discouraged such a course. Dismayed that the American Indians were still speaking their native tongue almost thirty years after Eliot began teaching them, Gookin urged those involved with the missions in 1674 to teach the natives English, arguing that "the changing of the language of a barbarous people, into the speech of a more civil and potent nation that have conquered them, hath been an approved experiment, to reduce such a people unto the civility and religion of the prevailing nation." Others agreed and applauded the free schools that he recommended should be used to accomplish this goal.³⁸ Yet for all the talk and plans, most Native Americans, including those who converted to Christianity, remained functionally illiterate in English for the simple reason that the missionaries themselves—who were the ones everyone wanted to do the actual language teaching—did virtually nothing to encourage them to learn English.³⁹ Concerned chiefly with bringing the Indians to Christ, Eliot began undermining Gookin's wishes long before the superintendent voiced them by telling the first group with whom he met in 1646 that God, the Maker of all mankind, was fully capable of understanding prayers in the American Indian language and that they should go ahead and pray in their own tongue.⁴⁰ Eliot's and other missionaries' subsequent willingness to learn the American Indian language made it unnecessary for Christian American Indians to learn English in order to learn the essentials of the English religion. So, too, did Eliot's willingness to translate a variety of religious materials into the Massachusetts dialect, including the entire Bible (in 1663), two catechisms, a grammar, a primer, a singing psalm book, Lewis Bayly's "Practice of Piety," Richard Baxter's "Call to the Unconverted," and Thomas Shepard's "Sincere Convert and Sound Believer."⁴¹ This is all the more significant because the literacy rate among the Native Americans was relatively high in their own language: one-third of the men, women, and children that Richard Bourne and John Cotton were working with in 1674, for example, could read American Indian, and others were clamoring to learn.⁴²

Although American Indian preachers were responsible for instructing the vast majority of Native American congregations by the 1670s, Native American ministers continued to bring any questions they might have to an English minister for clarification. This practice, along with the missionaries' infrequent visits, Eliot was happy to report, seemed to keep the ministers safe from the "spirit or way of heterodoxy."⁴³ As another check on his charges' understanding of gospel matters, Eliot was careful to avoid going into some of the more abstract doctrines until the American Indians knew enough to begin asking questions that introduced such topics. He kept to the Christian basics with the first group he taught, for example, until one fellow's voicing his fears about going to hell despite his resolve to keep the Sabbath could only be answered by an in-depth appeal to the doctrine of justification by faith. Another's question the following year concerning the eternal fate of children who die sinless gave Eliot occasion to flesh out the doctrines of original sin and covenant with God—the latter, to the Native Americans' delight, positing that when God chooses a person, He also chooses that person's children.⁴⁴ Obviously, a fair amount of specialized understanding was required before the American Indians could ask these and other questions of the missionaries, and Eliot's insistence on going slow and dealing with issues as the American Indians brought them up ensured that they would be getting the milk before the meat and understanding both.

That the Native Americans were getting a good dose of Puritan and biblical doctrine is evidenced by the wide variety of questions they asked, many of which Eliot recorded in several lists over the years.⁴⁵ Some, predictably, were rather superficial inquiries about various events and people in sacred history—one statistician, for example, asked about the number of good people living in Sodom when it was burned. Others based on sacred history were nevertheless not immediately suggested by the biblical stories, and they indicate that the individuals asking them were framing them in light of the Puritan doctrine they had heard. The native who asked if hell was made before or after Adam sinned, for example, had obviously heard more than the story of Adam in the garden and was well on his way to assimilating and understanding how all that he was learning fit together. Other questions dealt with more abstract

concepts such as faith, sin, and salvation, which again indicates that the Native Americans asking them were extrapolating from other things they had heard and were trying to work through the gray areas. Along these lines, one neophyte wondered if a person could sin a little and still be counted good, while another wondered where one who was “almost a good man, and dyeth” would spend the eternities.⁴⁶ Many questions, too, seem to have stemmed largely from the introspective musings of very active minds trying to relate what they had learned to their personal experiences and situations; certainly Cutshamoquin’s query about the propriety of wishing “I might die before I be so bad again as I have been” was the ultimate issue of several hours of deep thought, as was another’s question about how sinful forgetting things he had learned might be.⁴⁷ Thanks to Eliot’s lists, examples to the same effect could be multiplied ad nauseum, and it is clear that the missionaries were working with very bright people who not only knew a lot about Christianity and Puritanism but were also interested in learning more.

The Bible appears to have figured prominently in their education. Five years into his missionary work, Eliot had found “a good measure of ability in them . . . in memory to rehearse such Scriptures as I have read unto them and Expounded.” It is clear from the few confessions and records of American Indian sermons we have that many of the Native Americans came to know their scriptures inside and out and well enough to apply them to their particular situations. The convert Monequassun, for example, quoted many scriptural passages verbatim during his rather long-winded confession to the Puritan elders, and the American Indian teacher Symon Beckom was at home enough in the scriptures to find and lecture on several texts appropriate to his congregations’ difficult circumstances during King Philip’s War without the aid of an English minister.⁴⁸ Such a familiarity with the Bible does not come automatically, of course, and indicates that many converts were taking full advantage of the scripture Eliot had so laboriously translated for them. Much of this knowledge was gained in the scripture study that was an integral part of the Native Americans’ weekly meetings, and those who could read, or who had access to someone who could, engaged in regular study on their own.⁴⁹

Eliot and others felt the Native Americans were superlative in other respects as well. This included their mastery of the catechism. "There is none of the praying Indians, young or old," wrote Gookin in 1674, "but can readily answer any question of the catechism; which, I believe, is more than can be said of many thousands of English people."⁵⁰ The Native Americans' ability to pray also excited comment. Eliot's early pleasure that his converts did not learn to pray through rote memorization, for example, blossomed into a respectful awe for their ability to express themselves to heaven "far more, and more full, and spiritual, and various, then ever I was able to express to them," and yet again, at least one minister felt that "many *English* who professe themselves Christians" would do well to pray as frequently and fervently as the American Indians he had seen.⁵¹

As befitted true Puritans, the American Indian converts' hearts were just as engaged as their minds in their commitment to live as God's chosen. Sundry Native Americans were moved to tears as early as Eliot's second discussion with them, and such emotionalism during his lectures was common thereafter. Displays of feeling were generally kept well under control, but they could, at times, assume almost Pentecostal proportions: the tears came so freely for one repentant sinner, for example, that the "dry place of the *Wigwam* where hee stood . . . was bedirtied with them, powring them out so abundantly" that "the house was filled with weeping on every side."⁵² A few of the Native Americans who were present during these early meetings with Eliot were, along with several latecomers, eventually examined by the Puritan elders at Natick, where, "with such grave and sober countenances, with such comely reverence in gesture, and their whol carriage, and with such plenty of tears trickling down the cheeks of some of them," they made it clear that the process of conversion had been a fairly emotional one for them. Virtually all mentioned at some point in their speeches the fear and shame they began to feel for their sins after hearing the Word, and many went on for some time about the struggles they had in coming to grips with their newfound fallen natures.⁵³

In the end, perhaps the greatest evidence for the Native Americans' full conversion of both heart and mind was the Puritans' willingness to admit them into full church membership in 1660. This did not come easily for the Native Americans; indeed, Eliot's first

attempt in 1652 to have them so admitted failed. Yet it did not fail because the Native Americans' had not demonstrated full conversion. Rather, as Richard Mather noted, while the Native Americans' conversion was complete as far as he could tell, none were far enough along in their education at this early date to be able to effectively function as a pastor or elder—two essentials for any Puritan congregation—and Eliot and others who were capable of such callings and spoke the American Indian language already had their own congregations to worry about.⁵⁴ With the problem rectified, however, none who spent any time among the American Indian churches had any doubt that the converts were “to be accounted not almost, but altogether Christians.”⁵⁵

The missionaries' and others' frequent praise for the Native Americans' spirituality and gospel understanding belies the fact that these Englishmen were a difficult group to please and ever on the alert for those whose Christian “profession . . . is but a meere paint, and their best graces nothing but meere flashes and pangs, which are suddenly kindled and as soone go out and are extinct againe.” Shepard, among others, was an especially hard nut to crack, having seen “so much falsenesse in that point among many English,” he wrote, “that I am slow to beleeve herein too hastily concerning these poore naked men.”⁵⁶ Their apprehensions, of course, were well founded, and many had to stand by as some of their converts—even some of rank—participated in drinking binges and other activities unbefitting a true Christian.⁵⁷ When all was said and done, however, even a gospel laborer as leery as Gookin—himself more than willing to admit that “there may be some of them hypocrites, that profess religion, and yet are not sound hearted”—could firmly declare, “For my own part, I have no doubt, but am fully satisfied, . . . that divers of them do fear God and are true believers.”⁵⁸

Reasons for Converting

This is not to say that baser considerations did not play a role in American Indian conversions, especially at the beginning of Eliot's work. Indeed, the first American Indians to express an interest in learning more about the new religion did so because they had noticed how much more susceptible to disease the American Indians

were than their Christian neighbors. Waban, for example, the first Native American Eliot met with in 1646, reported that he first considered English ways “after the great sickness,” while one Tother-swamp, another early convert, told the examining elders at Natick that he began praying after most of his friends had died, a tragedy that followed hot on the heels of his telling himself he “would pray to God” only if “my friends should die, and I live.” Still another took up his cross after he recovered from a severe illness—proof to him that there was a God above, as the English said, who gave life.⁵⁹ Given the Native Americans’ belief in the overall justice of a divinity who was active in their day-to-day lives, many probably echoed the conclusions of a group of sachems in 1643—three years before Eliot began his labors—when the English seemed to be prospering while others struggled: “We do desire to reverence the God of the English,” they reported to the authorities of Massachusetts Bay, “because we see he doth better to the English than other gods do to others.”⁶⁰

After the initial contact had been made between the missionaries and American Indians hoping to survive the epidemics, it appears that many Native Americans became interested in the new religion through the exertions of a number of converts who, after converting, took it upon themselves to spread and confirm the word. Eliot wrote the Corporation that many seemed to have “some motions stirring in some of their hearts to pity and teach their poor Countrymen,” and, after noting that some of the more devout “doe goe severall places for a little while, and returne againe, and not without successe,” Eliot sought further to train American Indian preachers for the work.⁶¹ Converts frequently attended Eliot on his journeys among the unconverted, and soon this minister was sending out several Native American missionaries on their own. Some, hoping they could “invite their Countrymen to pray unto God,” went to tribes who had heard very little of Christianity, like the Narragansetts, while others were sent to American Indians in “new praying places” and other areas where groups of Native Americans interested in learning more had settled but where none of the locals were advanced enough in their knowledge to teach others.⁶²

Much that the missionaries and English themselves did also facilitated the conversions they so actively sought. Despite the opposition

to the missions and American Indians registered by some Englishmen, at least one Native American found the “true love” manifested by the English “that our great *Sachems* have not,”—compelling evidence that the Europeans were on the right track. Others apparently felt the same, as Eliot himself could hardly say enough about the “Godly Counsels” and sterling examples “all our Christian Families” provided for the Native Americans.⁶³ Even more than this, however, the Puritans shared many religious beliefs and practices with the American Indians, which made the transition to Christianity a much easier process than some have supposed. Both believed that their daily experiences and fortunes were controlled by divine powers—Jehovah for the Puritans, “manitowuk” for the Indians—who rewarded good for good and evil for evil.⁶⁴ While the missionaries may not have made any conscious attempts to use this common belief to attain their ends, they nevertheless capitalized on it, especially in this era of high native mortality from European diseases. On at least two occasions, for example, smallpox wreaked havoc with some of the converts’ “prophane Neighbours” while doing very little damage among the Christians—a selective mortification “all the good Indians [did] take a great notice of.”⁶⁵

The Native Americans shared other beliefs with the English that no doubt made the transition to Christianity easier, whether the missionaries knew it or not. Most apparently believed in the immortality of the soul. According to John Dunton, this belief was accompanied by the idea that “good” people were destined to “revel out an eternity in the pleasures of sense” while those who had wrought evil were doomed to an eternity of restless wandering.⁶⁶ While the American Indians were clearly polytheists, their belief in a chief God, “the great arbiter of souls,” at least approximated the Puritans’ Jehovah and was accompanied by their insistence that a consummately evil god also had some substantial dominion on the earth and in their lives.⁶⁷ The Native Americans of this time and place even had their own version of the Flood: a trip to the mountains sufficed to get the Noah-figure beyond the reach of the waters that destroyed everyone else, and a white hare replaced the dove in post-Flood exploration, but the similarities between the two traditions are obvious.⁶⁸ Despite the clear differences that separated the Native Americans and the English theologically, such similarities in

traditions must have narrowed the gap for some who would take the Christian plunge.

Learning the particulars of the Christian gospel and the stories of sacred history even awakened a sense of *déjà vu* in a few Native Americans. A surprised Eliot learned from some listeners “that they had heard some old men who were now dead, to say the same things; . . . that their forefathers did know God, but that after this, they fell into a great sleep, and when they did awaken they quite forgot him.” None of the Native Americans could say whence their ancestors had come by this knowledge, and Eliot could only hypothesize that these stories had reached the Native Americans from the French, who had been teaching the fundamentals of Christianity for decades to Algonquins living along the St. Lawrence River—American Indians with whom New England’s Native Americans had long associated.⁶⁹ A better explanation would be available two centuries later, of course, following Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon.

Conclusion

The American Indian churches in eastern and southern Massachusetts that Eliot was so instrumental in founding continued to thrive for some years after his death, but continued disease, war, land conflicts, and intermarriage began to take their toll on the churches as well as on the general Native American population of Massachusetts by the middle of the eighteenth century. By the early years of the nineteenth century, the once-thriving communities and congregations had been reduced to a few families and individuals,⁷⁰ and by 1830 New England’s seaboard Algonquins as a whole had lost, for all intents and purposes, their tribal identities. To conclude from this that Eliot’s efforts were ultimately in vain, however, would be a failure to understand the Lord’s plan of restoring the fullness of the gospel to the Lamanites in the latter days. Restoration scriptures make it clear that the Book of Mormon would be a *second* witness of Christ to the remnants of the Lamanites—not the first witness and by no means the only witness. The Bible was to be the first witness, and *someone* in America had to take the first halting steps in making its contents known to the natives of the land.

While the specific tribes with whom Eliot worked had largely died out by the time the Book of Mormon arrived on the scene, the work he started among the Lamanites at large had not died out—indeed, it had successfully set the stage for the fulfilment of prophecies and promises that had been in place for over two thousand years. Far from falling flat, Eliot’s efforts in seventeenth-century New England are still bearing fruit today.

NOTES

¹The literature on Latter-day Saint missions to Native Americans (including South American peoples) is vast. For a comprehensive listing of the primary and secondary literature, see James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whitaker, *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997: An Indexed Bibliography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 800, 804–5.

²Thomas Hooker (c. 1586–1647) led his congregation out of Massachusetts in 1635 and settled the town of Hartford on the Connecticut River, the first permanent European settlement in what would be Connecticut.

³Anne Hutchinson (c. 1590–1643) immigrated to Boston in 1634, where she openly challenged the Calvinist doctrine of predestination by arguing that God communicated with men and women, and could, through revelation, help them attain salvation. Tried and convicted for heresy and sedition in 1638, she and her family, with some followers, moved south to Narragansett Bay as some of Rhode Island’s earliest European settlers.

⁴For brief overviews of Eliot’s life and character, see John W. Ford, *Some Correspondence between the Governors and Treasurers of the New England Company in London and the Commissioners of the United Colonies in America* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), xvi–xvii; “The Historical Account of John Eliot, the First Minister of the Church at Roxbury,” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series, 8 (1802): 5–34; “Anecdote of Rev. John Eliot, of Roxbury,” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series, 10 (1809): 186–87. For a more detailed account, see Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *John Eliot: “Apostle to the Indians”* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

⁵The Pequots were a tribe of American Indians inhabiting the lower Connecticut River Valley. Some four hundred Pequots were killed in 1637 after colonists set fire to a fort in which they had taken refuge following an outbreak of hostilities between the two groups.

⁶Roger Williams (c. 1604–83) argued with Massachusetts’ Puritan clergy over American Indian land rights, relations with the Church of England, and

child baptism. Escaping deportation, he traveled to Narragansett Bay and founded Providence, Rhode Island, in 1636.

⁷“Historical Account of John Eliot,” 28–29; Daniel Gookin, “Historical Collections of the Indians in New England,” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series, 1 (1792): 170.

⁸Ford, *Correspondence*, 1, 68.

⁹King Philip’s War was the costliest and bloodiest of the seventeenth-century colonial Indian wars. The war began when the Wampanoag Indians—led by Metacomet, or “King Philip,” as the colonists called him—began resisting settlers’ encroachment on their lands in 1675. By the end of the war three years later, over one thousand colonists and an untold number of American Indians had lost their lives.

¹⁰See “History of Newton,” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series, 5 (1798): 261.

¹¹See Ford, *Correspondence*, 83.

¹²For brief overviews of Gookin’s life, see Gookin, “Historical Collections,” 228–29, in *Archaeologia Americana, Transactions and Collections of the American-Antiquarian Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1836), 2:425–28. For Gookin’s popularity, see Ford, *Correspondence*, 74–76.

¹³Henry Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse; Or a Glorious Manifestation of the further Progreffe of the Gospel among the Indians in New-England* (London: M. Simmons, 1652), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 4 (1834): 180–81; see also Ford, *Correspondence*, x–xi, xiv.

¹⁴Thomas Shepard, *The Clear Sun-shine of the Gospell Breaking Forth upon the Indians in New-England* (London: n.p. 1648), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 4 (1834): 37, 45; emphasis in original.

¹⁵Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 161–63; see also Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 45.

¹⁶Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 194–95; emphasis in original; Gookin, “Historical Collections,” 143, 174; see also Edward Winslow, *The Glorious Progress of the Gospel, amongst the Indians in New England* (London: Edward Winslow, 1649), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 4 (1834): 87; John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance: Or, A Further Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England* (London: Peter Cole, 1653), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 4 (1834): 219.

¹⁷See Ford, *Correspondence*, 78.

¹⁸John Eliot, *A Late and Further Manifestation of the Progress of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England* (London: n.p., 1655), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 4 (1834): 271.

¹⁹Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 66; emphasis in original; Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 195; Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 219.

²⁰Gookin, “Historical Collections,” 213, 215; [John Eliot], “Dedications to the Rev. John Eliot’s Indian Version of the Old and New Testament,” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series, 7 (1801): 226–27.

²¹Eliot, *Late and Further Manifestation*, 286.

²²See Daniel Gookin, "An Historical Account of the Doings and Sufferings of the Christian Indians in New England," in *Archaeologia Americana: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1836), 2:485.

²³See Ford, *Correspondence*, 54; Gookin, "Doings and Sufferings," 464, 482, 514, 531.

²⁴See Gookin, "Doings and Sufferings," 462, 427; "A Short Account of Daniel Gookin," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series, 1 (1792): 228.

²⁵See Gookin, "Doings and Sufferings," 497–500.

²⁶See Gookin, "Historical Collections," 143, 147, 152, 181; Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 161, 156.

²⁷Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 33; [Shepard], *The Day-Breaking, if not the Sun-Rising of the Gospell with the Indians in New-England* (London: Rich Cotes, 1647), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 4 (1834): 14; see also Gookin, "Historical Collections," 145.

²⁸See Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 155–57; Gookin, "Historical Collections," 143, 154, 160, 223. For a discussion of seventeenth-century ideas concerning the order in which various groups of people would be converted prior to the Millennium, see Richard W. Cogley, "John Eliot and the Origins of the American Indians," *Early American Literature* 21, no. 3 (winter 1986–87), 211.

²⁹See Gookin, "Historical Collections," 145–46; Winslow, *Glorious Progress*, 72–74, 93–95.

³⁰Henry Whitfield, *The Light Appearing More and More towards the Perfect Day; or, A Farther Discovery of the Present State of the Indians in New-England* (London: n.p., 1651), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 4 (1834): 119–20; emphasis in original. Eliot initially subscribed to John Cotton's theory that the American Indians were displaced Tartars from Asia. By 1649, however, he was entertaining ideas that at least some of the American Indians were descendants of the tribes of Israel, and that all were Hebrews. He also subscribed to the idea that the Jews would be converted before the Gentiles would (see Cogley, "Origins of the American Indians," 212–17).

³¹Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 17; Winslow, *Glorious Progress*, 88; Ford, *Correspondence*, 44; Gookin, "Historical Collections," 223, 183.

³²Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 16.

³³See Whitfield, *Light Appearing*, 145–47; Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 32–35, 64, 66; Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 156, 180–81, 190; Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 224; Winslow, *Glorious Progress*, 86, 97.

³⁴Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 48; emphasis in original.

³⁵Others have come to these same conclusions: see, for example, J. William T. Youngs Jr., "The Indian Saints of Early New England," *Early American Literature* 16, no. 3 (winter 1981–82), 248–52.

³⁶See Whitfield, *Strength out of Weakness*, 175.

³⁷For descriptions of Eliot's teaching methods, see Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 4–14; Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 45, 53, 55; Gookin, "Historical Collections," 168–69.

³⁸Gookin, "Historical Collections," 221–22; Ford, *Correspondence*, 59, 75.

³⁹See John Eliot, "Letters From Rev. John Eliot of Roxbury, to Hon. Robert Boyle, 1670–88," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series, 3 (1794): 186.

⁴⁰See Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 5–6; see also Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 231.

⁴¹See Gookin, "Historical Collections," 169, 172. Such religious publications in the American Indian language continued after Eliot's death; for a complete list and discussion, see William Kellaway, *The New England Company, 1649–1776* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962).

⁴²See Gookin, "Historical Collections, 197–200.

⁴³Ford, *Correspondence*, 84. See also Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 51–52; John Eliot, "An Account of Indian Churches in New England," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st series (1809): 10: 127. Even after Eliot had died, native preachers sought advice and instruction from English ministers.

⁴⁴See Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 22; Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 55–56.

⁴⁵See Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 5–8, 10–13, 17; Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 41–42, 45–46; Winslow, *Glorious Progress*, 84–86, 91–92; Whitfield, *Light Appearing*, 128–30, 132–33.

⁴⁶Winslow, *Glorious Progress*, 85.

⁴⁷Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 55; see also Whitfield, *Light Appearing*, 128–29.

⁴⁸Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 170; see also Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 235–36; Gookin, "Doings and Sufferings," 485.

⁴⁹See Gookin, *Historical Collections*, 183; Eliot, "Eliot's Letters to Boyle," 184; Eliot, "An Account of Indian Churches in New-England," 125.

⁵⁰Gookin, "Historical Collections," 169; see also Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 45.

⁵¹Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 215; Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 48; emphasis in original; see also Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 21.

⁵²Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 54, 60; see also Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 9, 12–14, 18; Whitfield, *Strength out of Weakness*, 182.

⁵³Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 223. For good examples of this apparently common struggle, see the confessions of Totherswamp, Monequassun, Ponampam, and Nishohkou in Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 229–31, 234–43, 250–52.

⁵⁴See Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 221–22.

⁵⁵Ford, *Correspondence*, 87.

⁵⁶Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 21; Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 37; see also Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 179; Gookin, "Doings and Sufferings," 515.

⁵⁷See Eliot, "Eliot's Letters to Boyle," 184; John Eliot, "A Brief Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New England" (London: n.p., 1671), in *Old South Leaflets*, no. 21 (Boston: Directors of the Old South Work,

Old South Meeting House, n.d.) 1:5; Whitfield, *Light Appearing*, 134, 140; Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 173; Gookin, "Historical Collections," 199.

⁵⁸Gookin, "Historical Collections," 183.

⁵⁹Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 231, 229; see also 254, 257.

⁶⁰Gookin, "Doings and Sufferings," 499.

⁶¹Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 65; Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 171.

⁶²Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 62; Ford, *Correspondence*, 37; Eliot, "An Account of Indian Churches in New-England," 127; Eliot, *Brief Narrative*, 4, 6, 8; Gookin, "Historical Collections," 183. Native American missionaries actually made some inroads among the Narragansetts, a tribe notorious for its rejection of Christian ministers (see Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 170).

⁶³Eliot, *Late and Further Manifestation*, 278; Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*, 216. The example of the English also helped *retain* converts, and American Indians who were intent on remaining faithful themselves and promoting the same in others at times requested more contact with the English; see Ford, *Correspondence*, 75; Eliot, "Eliot's Letters to Boyle," 185.

⁶⁴Henry W. Bowden and James P. Ronda, eds., *John Eliot's Indian Dialogues: A Study in Cultural Interaction* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980), 29. Similarly, success in the hunt meant that God was happy with the American Indians, while any sort of disaster was a sure indication of His displeasure (see John Dunton, "John Dunton's Journal," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2nd series, 2 [1814]: 111–12).

⁶⁵Whitfield, *Strength out of Weaknesse*, 165; Whitfield, *Light Appearing*, 134.

⁶⁶"John Dunton's Journal," 113; see also Shepard, *Day-Breaking*, 8; Winslow, *Glorious Progress*, 73. Historians have, at times, failed to note this native belief in two different types of eternities (see Bowden and Ronda, *John Eliot's Indian Dialogues*, 31).

⁶⁷Dunton, "John Dunton's Journal," 112; see also John Josselyn, *An Account of Two Voyages to New-England* (London: G. Widdowes, 1675), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 3 (1833): 301; Christopher Levett, *A Voyage into New England, Begun in 1623, and Ended in 1624* (London: William Jones, 1628), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 8 (1843): 176–77; Bowden and Ronda, *John Eliot's Indian Dialogues*, 20.

⁶⁸See Josselyn, *An Account of Two Voyages*, 301.

⁶⁹Shepard, *Clear Sun-shine*, 43–44; see also Winslow, *Glorious Progress*, 73, 95. For the interactions between the Massachusetts Indians and those living along the St. Lawrence, see Gookin, "Historical Collections," 156.

⁷⁰See Gookin, "Historical Collections," 195 n, 201 n.