

John Eliot: Apostle to the Indians
by Rebekah Mitsein

John Eliot emigrated from London to New England in 1631. Serving as a minister in Roxbury, Eliot came to be known as “the Apostle to the Indians” for his missionary work. As the settlements of the Massachusetts Bay Company expanded, the indigenous Algonquian population began dying out from the unfamiliar diseases the colonists brought with them. Several Puritan theologians interpreted this as God simply making more space for the English, his chosen pilgrims. Eliot opposed this point of view. He advocated for the fair treatment of Native Americans in land disputes, and he protested their sale into slavery. In an early sermon, Eliot likened the Native Americans to Ezekiel’s dry bones. They were God’s people, too, he argued, and the English were God’s instrument sent to breathe life into them.

Despite Eliot’s legendary oratory skills, his first conversion attempt was a flop. After struggling to proselytize to the Massachusetts sachem and diplomat Cutshamekin, Eliot wrote that the sachem and his people “despised what I said.” Though Cutshamekin would ostensibly convert at a later date, Eliot had to match wits with him several times over, and the Massachusetts was always cautious about capitulating to the English during these debates. Eliot found the Nipmuc Waban a more model convert. A powerful member of the Nonantum tribe, Waban made a profession of faith almost immediately, and he encouraged several others in his community to do so as well.

Intricate intercultural exchanges underpinned Waban’s conversion and the ones that followed that reflect Waban’s political savvy and the intersections between Christianity and Algonquian cosmology. Eliot came to believe that the Native Americans were members of the lost tribe of Israel, and that their salvation would hasten Christ’s second coming. This could only be achieved, he concluded, by ministering to Native Americans in their own languages. Eliot hoped to translate the Bible into Wôpanâak, and he turned to Algonquian–English speakers like Wawaus (James Printer), Cockenoe, and John Sassamon to produce *Mamusse Wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblum God*. Eliot would not have become the “Apostle to the Indians” without these interpreters and scholars, some of whom were educated not only in English but also in Latin and Greek. Sometimes their help was willingly given. John Sassamon and James Printer spent most of their lives mediating between the Massachusetts Bay area’s indigenous populations and English settlers. Sometimes it was coerced. Cockenoe was a captive, taken by the English during the Pequot War of the late 1630s.

Native Americans who converted to Christianity were termed “Praying Indians,” and they settled in fourteen different “Praying Towns” around the Boston area, the first of which was Natick. The English provided Praying Indians with a measure of support, protection, and autonomy. In exchange, the converts were expected to live like Europeans. They were required to cut their hair, wear English clothes, and build English-style buildings. However, they were not welcomed into English congregations. Praying Indians could not become members of Puritan churches.

Leaders like Cutshamekin were concerned that the Praying Town system would put the Algonquians at a severe political disadvantage. This anxiety was warranted. In the 1670s, the Narragansett sachem Metacomet (called “King Philip” by the English) led a resistance to

colonial land expansion. As war broke out, the colonial government grew suspicious of the Praying Indians, fearing that they were secretly Metacomet's allies. The Puritans turned on the Praying Towns, disbanding them and interning their inhabitants on Deer Island, where they were kept in brutal conditions without adequate food, water, or shelter. Even Waban was held prisoner on suspicion of conspiracy, though he had alerted the colonial government of Metacomet's unrest. The English burned almost every copy of the first printing of *Mamusse Wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblum God*.

Like Waban, John Sassamon also tried to warn the Puritans of Metacomet's intentions. In fact, Eliot had sent John Sassamon to Metacomet several times in the months leading up to the war, hoping to find a way to settle the dispute peacefully. But the colonial government didn't listen. John Sassamon's ability to translate between languages and cultures, the very thing that had made him vital to the survival and growth of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, also made him suspect to many. He was killed by three Wampanoag just before the start of the war for his loyalty to the English.

During King Philip's War, Eliot condemned the violence wreaked on Metacomet and his people. He proclaimed in a letter to John Winthrop, Jr., that he hoped the destruction would teach "the English to do the Indians justice and no wrong about their lands." He was devastated by the undeserved internment of his converts. In a rowboat, he attempted to bring them enough food and supplies to survive the unforgiving winter. Only half of the Praying Indians brought to Deer Island did. Once the war was finally over, Eliot ferried those that remained back to the mainland and helped them rebuild their homes. Collaborating with Robert Boyle, the famous English scientist, he raised funds for another printing of the Algonquian Bible.

James Printer laid the type for the second printing of *Mamusse Wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblum God* as he had the first. But since he, like John Sassamon, had worked as a scribe and translator for Metacomet, he had to bring the colonial government scalps of Metacomet's soldiers as proof of his loyalty before they would let him return to his job at the printing press at Cambridge. Cockenoe escaped back to his family on Long Island and ultimately became sachem of Montauk.

The story of the Praying Indians doesn't end in the seventeenth century. Despite Deer Island and the destruction of most of the early Praying Towns, descendants from Eliot's original converts still gather in the Boston area today and still call themselves Praying Indians (<http://natickprayingindians.org/history.html>). Other descendants from the first Praying Indians were forced west during the removals of the nineteenth century. They established different surviving Christian communities across the United States, like the Brothertown Nation in Wisconsin (<http://brothertownindians.org>).

The story of *Mamusse Wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblum God* doesn't end in the seventeenth century either. The Eliot Bible has been a cornerstone text for the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project and other efforts to resurrect Wôpanâak, which was all but lost as Native American languages were outlawed or discouraged through government-sanctioned assimilation efforts. Thanks in part to Eliot, John Sassamon, James Printer, and Cockenoe, and thanks to dedicated researchers like Jessie Little Doe Baird, Wôpanâak is once again a living language (<http://www.wlrp.org>).

Eliot was a man of his time. He believed that the path to salvation required not only conversion to Christianity but also conversion to an English way of life. Eliot undoubtedly played a role in the settler colonialism that devastated New England's Algonquian communities. The descendants of those communities live the history of that devastation today. But Eliot's converts also changed him. He adjusted his ministry and his vision for the Praying Towns to meet Algonquian desires and political expectations. When the inhabitants of Natick decided to make Cutshamekin their leader, for instance, Eliot respected their choice, despite his own rocky history with the intractable Massachusett. Upon Cutshamekin's death in 1651, Waban took his place. Cutshamekin's son Chickatabut refused to acknowledge Waban's authority. Rather than insisting he submit, Eliot obtained 6,000 acres for Chickatabut to begin his own Praying Town. Eliot remained committed to the wellbeing of his converts until his death in 1690.

At heart, Eliot believed in grace and abhorred hypocrisy. He cites Micah 6:8 frequently throughout the *Indian Dialogues*, preaching "faith...held forth in those works of sanctification and holy life." His vision of what a holy life should look like had deep flaws. But there is much we can learn from both John Eliot's strengths and his limitations about what it means to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly through the world.

For more on the Native American translators and scholars who worked closely with Eliot, see Lisa Brooks's *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War* (Yale UP, 2018). For more on Eliot and the Praying Indians, see Kristina Bross's *Dry Bones and Indian Sermons: Praying Indians in Colonial America* (Cornell UP, 2004) and Richard Cogley's *John Eliot's Mission to the Indians before King Philip's War* (Harvard UP, 1999). For a readable overview of King Philip's War, see Jill Lepore's *The Name of War* (Knopf, 1998). More information about seventeenth-century Native American writings can be found at The Yale Indian Papers Project website (<https://yipp.yale.edu/>) and the American Antiquarian Society's website (<http://www.americanantiquarian.org/EnglishToAlgonquian/home>). Eliot Church of Newton is built on the traditional homeland of the Massachusett.