

The Initiative of John Eliot in the Translation and Printing of the Algonquian Bible

by Andrew Adler¹

John Eliot, the Congregationalist minister of Roxbury, translated and printed the Bible into the Algonquian language in 1663. This book was the first Bible printed in America, funded by perhaps the first Protestant missionary organization. This was also the first Bible printed for cross-cultural missionary purpose and was translated by one of the earliest Protestant missionaries. The labor of John Eliot with the Algonquians took significant initiative. During the mid-17th century, there were few, if any, Protestant models for cross-cultural mission work to learn from. Eliot saw the thousands of Native Americans who did not know the life-giving Gospel and initiated ways to bring the Gospel to them. Under God's sovereignty, Eliot's desire to bring the message of Christ to the Algonquians was transformed into action, leading to the Algonquian Bible translation. In Cotton Mather's ecclesiastical history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather called for more Christians to look to the example of this "evangelical hero" and "evangelize the world."²

The Transformation of Desire into Action that led to the Algonquian Bible Translation

John Eliot initiated work among the Algonquians, "at a day, in which there was little being done to propagate the Gospel,"³ by taking his desire "to teach them to know Christ, and to bring them into his kingdom" and "[losing] no time in entering on his labors."⁴ Eliot was educated at the University of Cambridge and agreed to be the pastor for his Puritan neighbors

¹ Andrew Adler, a sophomore Honors College student and a Biblical languages major, won second place for this essay in the Dunham Bible Museum category of HBU's "Piece of the Past" essay contest in 2012.

² Cotton Mather. "The Triumphs of the Reformed Religion in America: Or, the Life of the Renowned John Eliot," *Magnalia Christi Americana; Or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England from Its First Planting, in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of Our Lord 1698*. Hartford: Silus Andrus and Son, 1855, 581-583.

³ Martin Moore. *Memoirs of the Life and Character of Rev. John Eliot Apostle of the N.A. Indians*. Boston: T. Bedington, 1822, 171.

⁴ John Wilson. *The Life of John Eliot, the Apostle of the Indians: including notices of the principal attempts to propagate Christianity in North America, during the seventeenth century*. Edinburgh: William Oliphant, 1828, 42.

headed to the New World for various reasons, “some on the account of the religious disturbances and some out of that spirit of colonization so active at that period”.⁵ Eliot became a minister in Roxbury in Massachusetts, and the colonial government of Massachusetts passed legislation that encouraged ministers to evangelize the Native Americans. Major Gonkin said that Eliot decided to begin working with the Native Americans because “First, the glory of God ... Secondly, his compassion and ardent affection to them ... Thirdly, the accomplishment and fulfilling the promise that New England people had made to their king... that one principal end of their going to plant these countries was, to communicate the gospel unto the native Indians.”⁶

Eliot reported he found a young Indian who, “I made my interpreter and thus I came at it, we must not sit still and look for miracles. Up and be doing, and the Lord will be with thee.”⁷ He began to learn the Algonquian language which did not yet have a written form. Algonquian is a notoriously difficult language. For example, the word for *our questions* is *kummogkodonattoottummooetiteanongannunnonmash*. When Eliot finished writing the Algonquian grammar, he wrote, “Prayers and pain through faith in Christ Jesus will do anything.”⁸

After several fruitful encounters with the Algonquians, with Eliot speaking to them in their native language, many believed. The Christian Algonquians, who became known as “Praying Indians” to the English, formed new towns separate from the other Algonquians, not wanting to be drawn back into their old pagan practices.⁹ The English Parliament formed The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England to fund Eliot’s work. Before this,

⁵ James de Normandie. “John Eliot, the Apostle to the Indians,” *Harvard Theological Review* 5.3 (1912), 350.

⁶ Wilson, *Life of John Eliot*, 40.

⁷ De Normandie, “John Eliot”, 359.

⁸ Mather., *Magnalia Christi*, 561-562.

⁹ Wilson, *Life of John Eliot*, 79.

Eliot had taken initiative and served the Algonquians with no additional pay for his *toile* (Mather pointed out *toile* is the anagram for Eliot).¹⁰

Eliot desired to produce a Bible in the Algonquian language. This was an act of great initiative. There were no organizations such as the Wycliffe Bible Translators that specialized in Bible translation. Eliot was a contemporary of the King James Version translators, but Eliot was doing something new by translating into a Native American language. Eliot believed this work to be very important and wrote that the translation was “sacred and holy work, and [it was] to be regarded with much fear, care and reverence.”¹¹ When Eliot desired to bring the Bible to the Algonquians, he began to labor to make it happen despite the lack of precedents. Steve Smith and Ying Kai, leaders of a significantly large church planting movement amongst an unreached people group in Asia, wrote “but when you don’t yet have a precedent, the Promise of Scripture is still clear. God will harvest a great multitude from every people group... Live your life based on His promise.”¹² Eliot acted out on the promises of Scripture, transforming his desire into action and completing a Bible for the Algonquian people despite a lack of immediate precedents.

Reliance on the Sovereignty of God for his Ministry and for the Printing of the Translation

John Eliot relied on the sovereignty of God to fulfill His promises and accomplish His purposes amongst the Algonquians. The Psalm 36 leaf of the quarto Bible that is on display in the Dunham Bible Museum reminds the reader of God’s faithfulness and power to fulfill His promises: “Thy mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens; and thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; thy judgments are a great deep: O LORD, thou

¹⁰ Mather, *Magnalia Christi*, 562.

¹¹ Wilson, *Life of John Eliot*, 88.

¹² Steve Smith and Ying Kai, “Someone Has to Be First: The Power of Precedent and Promise,” *Mission Frontiers* 33.2 (2011), 18.

preservest man and beast.”¹³ John Eliot was bold when threatened with persecution from chiefs and priests, even when by himself deep in the wilderness. Eliot would respond, “my God is with me; so that I fear neither you, nor all the sachims in the country; I’ll go on, and do touch me, if you dare.”¹⁴ He continued the work with the Algonquians despite the deaths of two of his children, because “my desire was that they should serve God on Earth; but if God will choose rather to have them serve him in Heaven, I have nothing to object against it, his will be done.”¹⁵

The printing of the Algonquian Bible was a great feat for mid-17th century Colonial America. The Cambridge Press was one of the few presses in the Americas. The Bible required 149 sheets, and the press moved at a pace of producing 1000 copies of one sheet a week. Special type had to be brought from England.¹⁶ The project cost a significant amount money, but it was paid for by the newly formed Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England. When finished, several copies were sent to financial supporters in England. King Charles II received the translation “very graciously” [sic], according to a letter to Eliot from Governor Boyle.¹⁷ Mr. Eliot “exercised this trust in that gracious providence which had hitherto supplied all his wants” by beginning the printing the Old Testament with his own money, even before he was given permission from his financial supporters in the Society.¹⁸

John Eliot’s translation and printing of the Algonquin Bible is a great example of taking initiative in new cross-cultural ministry due to his transformation of desire into action and his reliance on the sovereignty of God. Cotton Mather wrote, “Behold, ye Americans, the greatest honour that ever you were partakers of ... the only Bible that was printed in all of America, from

¹³ Psalm 36:5-6, (KJV).

¹⁴ Mather, , 566.

¹⁵ Moore, *Memoirs*, 13

¹⁶ George Parker Winship. *The Cambridge Press, 1638-1692; a Reexamination of the evidence concerning the Bay Psalm Book and the Eliot Indian Bible as Well as Other Contemporary Books and People*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1945, 210.

¹⁷ Winship, *The Cambridge Press*, 234.

¹⁸ Wilson, *Life of John Eliot*, 201.

the very foundation of the world ... which pen had it not been lost would have certainly deserved a richer case than was bestowed upon that pen with which Holland writ his translation of Plutarch.”¹⁹

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¹⁹ Mather, *Magnalia Christi*, 564.