

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 56  August 2010

Oly Carmel, a Young African in Herrnhut

On August 22, 1735, Oly Carmel, the first convert of the Moravian mission in the Caribbean, was baptized in Ebersdorf, Germany. His short but varied life is the topic of This Month in Moravian History.



Oly Carmel (left) and Jupiter from the Carolinas (†1739) on the 1747 First Fruits painting (detail) by J. V. Haidt.

Oly was born around 1727 in the kingdom of Loango in what is now the Congo. His short life was characterized by tragic events that took place when he was very young. Oly later told Moravian missionaries that his father and brother were killed in a “battle,” after which he was captured and taken to the Caribbean island of St. Thomas as a slave. There he was purchased by Moravian missionaries and given the name Carmel. Carmel lived with the Moravians until August 12, 1734, when Leonhard Dober, one of the missionaries, left for Europe and took Carmel along.

During the 18th century, Moravians took a number of converts with them from the mission fields to Europe. There were several reasons for this practice. The missionaries wanted to show the fruits of their labor to the Moravians at home. Another reason was that they wanted to have the converts experience life in a Moravian community. This experience would prepare them for their service as assistants in the mission once they returned to their homes. Unfortunately, only a few converts ever returned to the places they came from. Most of them died from European diseases within five years of their arrival. Because of the high mortality rate of non-European converts taken to German congregations, Moravians only took a few converts with them after 1750.

According to Oldendorp, the 18th-century Moravian historian of the Caribbean mission, Oly Carmel was brought to Europe, supposedly to be given to a “certain distinguished pious man.” It seems likely that Oldendorp meant Count Zinzendorf with this “pious man.”

Oly Carmel and Dober arrived in Copenhagen on November 27, 1734, and from there they continued on to Herrnhut. On February 5, 1735, both travelers were greeted with the Kiss of Peace during a lovefeast in Herrnhut. During the following months, Carmel seemed to adjust well to life in the Moravian community and in August of 1735 the time seemed right to baptize him.

At that time, Herrnhut was still part of the (Lutheran) parish of Berthelsdorf. However, the local Lutheran minister, Johann Andreas Rothe, objected to the baptism. Rothe argued that Carmel had not received sufficient

instruction; he also wanted to perform an exorcism, which was customary with adult baptisms. Moravians considered Carmel still a child and did not think this act as necessary. Therefore, the baptism did not take place in Herrnhut, but in Ebersdorf in Thuringia. Ebersdorf was the residence of the family of Zinzendorf’s wife, Erdmuth Dorothea.

On August 22, 1735, Friedrich Christoph Steinhofer, minister in Ebersdorf, baptized Carmel and named him Joshua. Joshua’s sponsor was Friedrich Martin, who was on his way from Herrnhut to St. Thomas to serve as a missionary. Steinhofer writes that after singing a hymn “Carmel approached the table, together with his godfather, Friedrich Martin. He was contemplative and stood there like a lamb. It moved my heart.” The next day Joshua and Leonhard Dober returned to Herrnhut where the congregation was delighted to receive “the first fruit of the Caribbean mission.”

Unfortunately, Joshua only lived another seven months. He passed away on March 28, 1736, in Herrnhut and was buried on God’s Acre.

Sources

Rüdiger Kröger, *Johann Leonhard Dober und der Beginn der Herrnhuter Mission* (2006); C.G.A. Oldendorp, *Historie der caribischen Inseln ...*, vol. 2 (2002); Paul Peucker, “Nichteuropäer in den deutschen Brüdergemeinen des 18. Jahrhunderts,” *Unitas Fratrum*, no. 59/60 (2007): 1-35. image: courtesy Moravian Congregation at Zeist, Netherlands.