

This Month in Moravian History

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Gottlieb Israel Suffered Shipwreck

In the staircase of Lindsey House, the Moravian headquarters near London, there was a painting of a man on a rock in the midst of a raging sea. This was Gottlieb Israel, a Moravian missionary who 275 years ago showed remarkable courage during a shipwreck on January 17, 1740.



Gottlieb Israel was born in the town of Eibau, not far from Herrnhut in Germany, on January 16, 1717. From an early age on Israel had difficulties walking because of a disabled foot. When he was 18 years old, he joined the Moravians and moved to Herrnhut where he worked as a tailor. In 1738 he asked to be sent out as a missionary: "I want to be a pilgrim, who does not own anything and will not possess anything, but I only want to proclaim the crucified Savior."

Originally Israel's destination was Guinea in Africa but his departure from Amsterdam was delayed for so long that he was sent to St. Thomas in the Caribbean instead. On November 17, 1739, Israel, together with another Moravian, Albin Feder, left for the Caribbean. During the voyage both Feder and Israel fell ill after drinking tea; they suspected that one of the ship's crew had tried to poison them. Thanks to the good care of

the ship's cook, a freed slave, they both recovered.

They arrived on St. Eustatius on January 7, 1739. Here they had to change ships in order to get to St. Thomas. The relatively short journey turned out to be disastrous. They quickly sailed northwest from St. Eustatius to Spanish Town on Virgin Gorda. But then on January 16, the wind dropped and the ship got caught in the perilous waters between Virgin Gorda and Tortola. The captain, who was unfamiliar with this part of the Caribbean, decided to drop anchor near Scrub Island for the night. The next morning, on January 17, as it was still dark, the weather suddenly changed. A storm with strong winds, thunder, and rain began to rage and shook the ship back and forth. The ship broke loose and was thrown against a sharp cliff, close to the coast of Scrub. The crew took to the only lifeboat and left, leaving the others behind. The captain and first mate had to threaten the crew with their guns in order to get on the boat. Feder and Israel were left on the wrecked ship. Israel desperately waved at the captain demanding to be taken aboard. The captain took off his hat and sailed away.

And so the two Moravians were stuck on the remains of a ship that was quickly breaking apart in the swirling water. Together with three slaves Feder and Israel pulled themselves along the bowsprit to the small cliff. Now the five of them were all on top of the cliff, without enough room for all of them. Feder tried to get to the island by stepping off the cliff onto stones in the water. As he was balancing from one stone to another, a wave came and swept him away out to sea.

While Israel who stayed behind on the cliff saw the corpse of his fellow missionary drift away, he started to sing the following hymn as a departing blessing and farewell:

*With fire and with spirit endowed ev'ry moment,
Thou flock of Jesus highly blest,
Go forth and proclaim ye the word of atone-
ment,
Both far and near, and when oppressed
By hardships and trials, be bold in God,
And gladly for him spend your life and blood;
Midst tempests at sea and wild deserts then go,
The seed of the gospel 'mongst heathen to sow.*

The story of Israel singing a hymn in the midst of despair and misery soon became a strong image of missionary courage in the Moravian Church. Zinzendorf asked Haidt to paint a picture of the scene which he hung in his residence at Lindsey House. The original painting does not survive, but the Bethlehem Archives has a miniature study by Haidt of this image. To this day, this hymn is included in the German Moravian hymn book with a note stating that Israel sang these words after Feder drowned in the sea near Tor-tola.

Israel made it safely to St. Thomas where he served until his death at New Herrnhut on August 2, 1743.

Sources

C. G. A. Oldendorp, *Historie der Caribischen Inseln* vol. 2/1 (2002). Hymn is English translation of "Wo seid ihr, ihr Schüler der ewigen Gnade" in *A Collection of Hymns* (1789), v. 644:2.