



Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos
David Brainerd (1746)

Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos (Latin for “God’s Marvels among the Indians”) was a book compiled from the diaries and correspondence of David Brainerd. Brainerd was a white Presbyterian minister from Massachusetts who undertook missionary work to the indigenous Lenape people, also known as the Delawares. During the period Brainerd worked among them, Lenapes were under mounting pressure from colonists to give up their lands in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and move farther west; by the 1770s, most Lenapes had relocated into present-day Ohio.

Although the Scottish missionary society that produced Brainerd’s book intended to advertise his success at winning converts, in these selections Brainerd describes Lenape resistance to Christianity. A year after the book was published, Brainerd died of tuberculosis; he was not yet 30 years old. The Presbyterians’ Lenape mission continued under the leadership of John Brainerd, David’s younger brother.

I have met with great difficulty, in my work among these Indians, from the rooted aversion to Christianity that generally prevails among them. They are not only brutishly stupid and ignorant of divine things, but many of them are obstinately set against Christianity and seem to abhor even the Christian name.

This aversion to Christianity arises partly from a view of the immorality and vicious behavior of many who are called Christians. They observe that horrid wickedness in nominal Christians which the light of nature condemns in themselves and, not having distinguishing views of things, are ready to look upon all the white people alike and to condemn them alike for the abominable practices of some. Hence when I’ve attempted to treat with them about Christianity, they have frequently objected the scandalous practices of Christians and cast in my teeth all they could think of that was odious in the conduct of any of them—have observed to me that the white people lie, defraud, steal, and drink worse than the Indians; that they have taught the Indians these things, especially the latter of them, who, before the coming of the English, knew of no such thing as strong drink; that the English have, by these means, made them quarrel and kill one another and, in a word, brought them to the practice of all those vices that now prevail among them, so that they are now vastly more vicious, as well as much more miserable, than they were before the coming of the white people into the country.

These and such like objections they frequently make against Christianity, which are not easily answered to their satisfaction, many of them being facts too notoriously true. The only way I have to take in order to surmount this difficulty is to distinguish between nominal and real Christians, and to shew them that the ill conduct of many of the former proceed not from their being Christians but from their being Christians only in name, not in heart, etc. To which it has sometimes been objected that if all those who will cheat the Indians are Christians only in name, there are but few left in the country to be Christians in heart. [...]

Another thing that serves to make them more averse to Christianity is a fear of being enslaved. They are, perhaps, some of the most jealous people living and extremely averse to a state of

servitude, and hence are always afraid of some design forming against them. Besides, they seem to have no sentiments of generosity, benevolence, and goodness, [so] that if anything be proposed to them as being for their good, they are ready rather to suspect that there is, at bottom, some design forming against them than that such proposals flow from goodwill to them and a desire of their welfare. And hence, when I've attempted to recommend Christianity to their acceptance, they have sometimes objected that the white people have come among them, have cheated them out of their lands, driven them back to the mountains from the pleasant places they used to enjoy by the seaside, etc.; that therefore they have no reason to think the white people are now seeking their welfare, but rather that they have sent me out to draw them together, under a pretense of kindness to them, that they may have an opportunity to make slaves of them as they do of the poor Negroes, or else to ship them on board their vessels and make them fight with their enemies, etc.

Thus they have oftentimes construed all the kindness I could show them and the hardships I have endured in order to treat with them about Christianity. "He never would," say they, "take all this pains to do us good; he must have some wicked design to hurt us some way or other." And to give them assurance of the contrary is not an easy matter while there are so many who (agreeable to their apprehension) are only seeking their own, not the good of others. [...]

Another spring of aversion to Christianity in the Indians is their strong attachment to their own religious notions (if they may be called religious) and the early prejudices they have imbibed in favor of their own frantic and ridiculous kind of worship. What their notions of God are, in their pagan state, is hard precisely to determine. [...] I find that in ancient times, before the coming of the white people, some supposed there were four invisible powers who presided over the four corners of the earth. Others imagined the sun to be the only deity and that all things were made by him—others, at the same time, having a confused notion of a certain body or fountain of deity, somewhat like the *anima mundi* so frequently mentioned by the more learned ancient heathens, diffusing itself to various animals and even to inanimate things, making them the immediate authors of good to certain persons, as was before observed with respect to various supposed deities. But after the coming of the white people, they seemed to suppose there were three deities, and three only, because they saw people of three different kinds of complexion, viz., English, Negroes, and themselves.

'Tis a notion pretty generally prevailing among them that 'twas not the same god made them who made us, but that they were made after the white people, which further shows that they imagine a plurality of divine powers. And I fancy they suppose their god gained some special skill by seeing the white people made, and so made them better. For 'tis certain they look upon themselves and their methods of living (which, they say, their god expressly prescribed for them) vastly preferable to the white people and their methods—and hence will frequently sit and laugh at them as being good for nothing else but to plow and fatigue themselves with hard labor, while they enjoy the satisfaction of stretching themselves on the ground and sleeping as much as they please, and have no other trouble but now and then to chase the deer, which is often attended with pleasure rather than pain. Hence, by the way, many of them look upon it as disgraceful for them to become Christians, as 'twould be esteemed among Christians for any to become pagans. And now, although they suppose our religion will do well enough for us, because prescribed by

our god, yet 'tis no ways proper for them because not of the same make and original. This they have sometimes offered as a reason why they did not incline to hearken to Christianity. [...]

They seem to have some confused notion about a future state of existence, and many of them imagine that the *chichung* (i.e., the shadow), or what survives the body, will at death go southward and, in an unknown but curious place, will enjoy some kind of happiness, such as hunting, feasting, dancing, and the like. [...] They seem to have some faint and glimmering notion about rewards and punishments, or at least happiness and misery, in a future state [...] These rewards and punishments they suppose to depend entirely upon their conduct with relation to the duties of the second table, i.e., their behavior towards mankind, and seem, so far as I can see, not to imagine that they have any reference to their religious notions or practices, or anything that relates to the worship of God. I remember I once consulted a very ancient but intelligent Indian upon this point for my own satisfaction—asked him whether the Indians of old times had supposed there was anything of the man that would survive the body. He replied yes. I asked him where they supposed its abode would be. He replied 'twould go southward. I asked him further whether it would be happy there. He answered, after a considerable pause, that the souls of good folks would be happy, and the souls of bad folks miserable. I then asked him who he called “bad folks.” His answer (as I remember) was those who lie, steal, quarrel with their neighbors, are unkind to their friends and especially to aged parents, and, in a word, such as are a plague to mankind. These were his “bad folks”; but not a word was said about their neglect of divine worship and their badness in that respect.

[...] I endeavor as much as possible to show them the inconsistency of their own notions and so to confound them out of their own mouths. But I must also say I have sometimes been almost nonplussed with them and scarce knew what to answer them—but never have been more perplexed with them than when they have pretended to yield to me as knowing more than they, and consequently have asked me numbers of impertinent and yet difficult questions, as: How the Indians came first into this part of the world, away from all the white people, if what I said was true, viz., that the same God made them who made us? How the Indians became black if they had the same original parents with the white people? And numbers more of the like nature.

Source: David Brainerd, *Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos, or The Rise and Progress of a Remarkable Work of Grace amongst a Number of the Indians in the Provinces of New-Jersey and Pennsylvania [...]* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, [1746]), 208-220, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/dul1.ark:/13960/t0ht3m66w>. Public domain.

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These edited excerpts from Brainerd's book are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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