



Memoir of Henry Obookiah

Edwin W. Dwight

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Henry Opukahaia—rendered “Obookiah” by his English-speaking contemporaries—was a Native Hawaiian who enlisted as a cabin boy on a US merchant ship and thus migrated to New England. There he became a Congregationalist. With a handful of other Native Hawaiian expatriates, Opukahaia was one of the first students in the Foreign Mission School, founded in Connecticut by white Protestants to train indigenous missionaries. Not long after enrolling, however, Opukahaia fell ill and died and therefore never returned to Hawai‘i as planned. He was eulogized in a memoir by Edwin Dwight, a white Congregational minister and founding principal of the Foreign Mission School. Dwight’s memoir quoted at length from Opukahaia’s own English writings, in the form of a manuscript autobiography, letters, and a diary. The following selections offer glimpses into how religion mediated Opukahaia’s relationships with other Native Hawaiians and with white Americans.

1. Dwight recounts Opukahaia’s training in traditional Hawaiian religion

Henry Obookiah was a native of Hawaii, the most important and populous of the Sandwich Islands. He was born about the year 1792. [...] When Obookiah was at the age of ten or twelve, both his parents were slain before his eyes, “in a war,” to use his own language, “made after the old king died, to see who should be the greatest among them.” [...] Obookiah, being now a prisoner in the hands of the enemy, was taken home to the house of the very man who murdered his parents. With him he remained until he was found by an uncle, who, having obtained the consent of his keeper, took him into his own family and treated him as his child.

This uncle was a priest and had the rank of high priest of the island. It was his design to educate Obookiah for the same service. In pursuance of this purpose, he taught him long prayers and trained him to the task of repeating them daily in the temple of the idol. This ceremony he sometimes commenced before sunrise in the morning and at other times was employed in it during the whole or the greater part of the night. Parts of these prayers he often repeated to gratify the curiosity of his friends after he came to this country. They regarded the weather, the general prosperity of the island, its defense from enemies, and especially the life and happiness of the king.

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2. Selections from Opukahaia’s autobiography

[He resolves to leave Hawai‘i]

At the death of my parents, I was with them; I saw them killed with a bayonet—and with them my little brother, not more than two or three months old. So that I was left alone, without father and mother, in this wilderness world. [...] And while I was at play with other children, after we had made an end of playing, they return to their parents; but I was returned into tears, for I have no home, neither father nor mother. I was now brought away from my home to a strange place, and I thought of nothing more but want of father or mother and to cry day and night.

While I was with my uncle, for some time I began to think about leaving that country to go to some other part of the world. I did not care where I shall go to. I thought to myself that if I should get away and go to some other country, probably I may find some comfort, more than to live there without father and mother. [...] About this time, there was a ship come from New York—Captain Brintnall, master. As soon as it got into the harbor, in the very place where I lived, I thought of not more but to take the best chance I had [...] As soon as my uncle heard that I was going to leave him, he shut me up in a room, for he was not willing to let me go.

While I was in the room, my old grandmother, coming in, asked me what was my notion of leaving them and go with people whom I know not. I told her it is better for me to go than to stay there. She said if I should leave them, I shall not see them anymore. I told her that I shall come back in a few months, if I live. Her eyes were filled with tears. She said that I was very foolish boy. This was all she said, and she went out from the room. As soon as she went out, I looked around, expecting to find a hole, that I might escape out of the house. And as soon as I saw a little hole in the side of the house, I got through it and went on board the ship. When my uncle heard that I was on board the ship, he got into his canoe and came board the ship inquiring after me. [...] He would not let me go unless I pay him a hog for his god (for I was taken under his care to be made for a minister). [...]

[He lives with white families in Connecticut]

We landed at New York in the year 1809 [...My] friend Thomas^a and myself [...] went home with Captain Brintnall to New Haven, the place where he lived. There I lived with him for some time. In this place, I become acquainted with many students belonging to the college. By these pious students, I was told more about God than what I had heard before; but I was so ignorant that I could not see into it whether it was so. Many times I wish to hear more about God but find nobody to interpret it to me. I attended many meetings on the Sabbath but find difficulty to understand the minister. I could understand or speak but very little of the English language. [...]

I heard that a ship was ready to sail from New York, within a few days, for Hawaii. The captain was willing that I might take leave of this country and go home, if I wish. But this was disagreeable to my mind. I wished to continue in this country a little longer. I stayed another week—saw Mr. E. W. Dwight, who [...] asked me if I wished to learn to read and write. I told him that I was. [...]

Now I wished no more to live with captain any longer, but rather wished to live somewhere else, where I could have an opportunity to write and read. I went to my friend Mr. D., who was to be my best and kind friend; I made known to him all my desire. I told him that I wished to live where I could have an opportunity to get in some school and work a part of the time. He then wished me to live with President Dwight.^b [...] I lived with this pious and good family for some time and went to school [...] Here was the first time I meet with praying family morning and

^a *Thomas Hopu, who had enlisted as a cabin boy along with Opukahaia. After Opukahaia's death, Hopu returned to Hawai'i as a missionary.*

^b *Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College (the future university); a distant relative of Edwin Dwight.*

evening. It was difficult for me to understand what was said in prayer, but I doubt not this good people were praying for me while I was with them [...]

I then left New Haven and went home with Mr. Mills [of Torrington]. I lived with this family in the year 1810. These people were the most judicious and kindest people. I was treated by them in the most affectionate manner [...] It seemed to me as my own home. It was. [...] Mrs. Mills, the wife of the Rev. Mr. Mills, was a very amiable woman, and I was treated by her as her own child. She used me kindly and learned me to say the catechism.

[He becomes Christian]

Many ministers called on the Rev. Mr. Mills, and I was known by a great number of ministers. But on account of my ignorance of the true God, I do not wish to hear them when they talk to me. I would not wish to be in the room where they were; neither did I wish to come near a minister, for the reason that he should talk to me about God, whom I hated to hear. I was told by them about heaven and hell, but I did not pay any attention to what they say; for I thought that I was just as happy as the other people, as those who do know about God much more than I do.

[...] At the close of the year 1810, I left Torrington and went to Andover. I continued there for some time. Here my wicked heart began to see a little about the divine things; but the more I see to it, the more it appear to be *impenetrability*. [...]

In the spring season of the year 1811, I hired myself out for a month or two [...] with Mr. F. [...] Mr. F. one day sent me into the woods, not far from the house, to work. I took an axe and went and worked there till towards noon. But here [...] many thoughts come into my mind that I was in a dangerous situation. I thought if I should then die, I must certainly be cast off forever. While I was working, it appeared as it was a voice saying, "Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?" I worked no longer—but dropped my axe and walked a few steps from the place (for the people in the house would soon send a lad after me, for it was noon). I fell upon my knees and looked up to the Almighty Jehovah for help. I was not but an undone and hell-deserving sinner. I felt that it would be just that God should cast me off whithersoever he would—that he should do with my poor soul as it seemed to him fit. I spent some time here until I heard a boy calling for me, and I went. The people in the house asked of my sadness, to which I give but little answer. In the night, my sleep was taken away from me. I kept awake almost the whole night. [...] The next morning, I rose up before the rest and went to a place where I was alone by myself. Here I went both morning, night, and noon. At this place, I find some comfort. And when I go there, I enjoy myself better all the day. [...]

[Hollis, New Hampshire, 1812:] I lived with two good men, Dea. E. and Dea. B., and with the Rev. Mr. S. While I was in this place, I became more thoughtful about myself. I attended many of the young people's meetings, and I was quite happy. But I was now taken sick of a fever at the house of Dea. B. I was very weak and [...] continued sick for five weeks. The whole family of Dea. B. were very kind. [...]

One day, Mrs. B. asked me whether I was willing to die and leave this world of sin and go to the better. To which I replied that I should have no objection if God should do with me as it seemed

to him fit. She added, “Do you remember the goodness and the kindness of God towards you?” I answered yes—for I have neither a father nor a mother, nor a brother nor a sister, in this strange country but he. But oh! am I fit to call him my Father? “Whosoever doeth his will, the same is a child of God.” [Not long] after my complaint was over, I began to experience hope in religion. [...] I took much comfort and happiness both in my secret prayer and in serious conversation with others. I thought now with myself that I have met with a change of heart. It was so, if I mistake not. For the Lord Jesus did appear as chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely; and his mercy appeared to be welcome to a sinner as I. [...]

[He prepares to be a missionary]

[Circa 1815:] I was now taken under the care of the Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, with a view to my future employment to be as a missionary to my poor countrymen, who are yet living in region and shadow of death, without knowledge of the true God and ignorant of the future world—have no Bible to read, no Sabbath, and all these things are unknown to them. With them I feel and expected to spend the remaining part of my days in the service of our glorious Redeemer, if the Almighty should spare my life. I often feel for them in the night season, concerning the loss of their souls, and wish many times to be among them before I am fit to come to them—for I long to see them. Oh, that the Lord would pluck them from the everlasting burning! and that the Lord may be their God, and may they be his people and be made “partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.” Oh, what a happy time I have now, while my poor friends and relations at home are perishing with hunger and thirsty, wanting of divine mercy and water out of the well of salvation. May the Lord Jesus dwell in my heart and prepare me to go and spend the remaining part of my life with them.

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3. Selections from letters written by Opukahaia to others in New England

[To Rev. Samuel Mills — January 27, 1813]

I went to Tyngsbury last week to see a boy who came from Hawaii. He arrived last June [...] I hope the Lord will have mercy upon his poor soul. He knew nothing of the Savior before I told him. I first mentioned to him Genesis 1, etc., telling him that God made the world by his own power; then he said, “Oh, how foolish we are to worship wood and stone gods; we give them hogs and cocoa nuts and banana, but they cannot eat.” Yes, said I, it is foolish. Then he asked me where that man was that made everything. I told him he was everywhere with us. Does he hear when you and I talk? says he. I told him yes, and you must believe in him if you would be his friend. He said he did believe what I told him. He has not learned to understand English, but I spoke in Hawaii. I took him with me to the minister’s house on Sabbath evening, so I told him in Hawaii what Mr. Allen, the minister, said. He had been before but could not understand what was said. I told him what God did for him in keeping him alive and bringing him to this country. He said he liked that man very much (meaning God). He asked me many questions, again and again, about God, which I answered. After we went to bed, he said he never would forget what I had told him. He said when he eat, he would remember who gave him food. The people where he lived said he might stay there as he would, and when he had learned English a little, he might go to school. He did cry when I left him.

[To Rev. Eleazer T. Fitch — June 4, 1815]

O my dear friend, do not cease to pray for me, and for Tennooe,^c and for the poor ignorant people at Hawaii. And pray for the poor people in this country as well as the heathen, for their hearts are not with God, and their ears are much deafer than that of the heathen, when they hear the word of God on every Sabbath and can read the holy scriptures. [...] I have been translating a few chapters of the Bible into the Hawaiian language. I found I could do it very correctly.

[To an unidentified Native Hawaiian friend in Boston — undated]

I doubt not that you have seen some people in this country—as much as 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, and 60 years of age—still neglecting religion from year to year, and adding sin to sin as long as they live. This will not do, for God hath said, “My Spirit shall not always strive with man.” But alas, sin is a lovely friend to a sinner. He will not get away from his sins for a thousand worlds. O sinner, “taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Do write me a long letter without delay, and tell me how God did appear to you at first, and tell me what is your first object if you should return home, etc.

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4. Selections from Opukahaia’s diary, 1816

March 23. This morning, my friend Thomas come to me with a sad countenance and wished that we might pray together in our own language. I told him that I had no objection, that I would willingly do it. We then prayed to that Almighty God who was able to help us, and I believe that our prayers were graciously answered. We offered up two prayers in our tongue—the first time that we ever prayed in this manner. And the Lord was with us.

April 1. This evening, my friend Thomas and myself conversed about what we would do first at our return to our own country, and how we should begin to teach our poor brethren about the religion of Jesus Christ, etc., and many other kinds of conversation that we thought of. And we both thought that we must first go to the king; or else we must keep a school to educate the children and get them to have some knowledge of the scriptures, and then we must give to them some idea of God. But these thoughts seemed to be blind on some accounts, not knowing how to do better without God’s direction. [...]

April 3. This day I set apart for secret prayer, and the Lord was graciously with me and has given me some spirit to pray. It seemed as if I could not enjoy myself better in any worldly conversations than I did in prayer. I can say, as I trust, that the Spirit of God has been with me this day. God appeared to be gracious and lovely. Holy thou art, O Lord God of hosts! O Lord, look down with a pitying eye upon this thy servant, whom thou hast brought from a heathen land! Be gracious to all the rest of my heathen brethren who are now in this country. Do now, O Lord, hear my call. [...]

^c William Kanui, a.k.a. Tenui, another Native Hawaiian expatriate and future missionary.

June 25. Last evening, I attended a prayer meeting and enjoyed great comfort to my soul. I thought how Christians all agree in their feelings toward each other in a lovely manner. I once thought while we were in the room, in such a little circle, and enjoyed ourselves in conversing here in this world, how much happiness will be found at the great court of the Almighty, when all the children of God are gathered together from the east and the west and are set down in the kingdom of heaven. What a happy time will it be for Christians!

July 3. [...] I set out to walk; and at the place to which I came, I found a sick woman lying upon a sick bed. She had been in that case for eight years. When she heard of my being in the house, she wished to see me. I conversed with her concerning her case [...] I asked her whether she was willing to leave this world of sin and to be present with her lovely Jesus. She replied, “Oh yes, oh yes; I hope I shall reach that peaceful shore, where I shall have neither sickness nor pain, as I have now.” Before I was about to leave her, she wished me to pray with her, and this was done. She took hold of my hand and begged me to remember her, thus: “O my friend, do not forget me in your prayers; and if I do not see you again in this life, I shall in better life than this.”

July 17. I have just returned from a visit to my friends. As I was walking through the woods, I came to a house which stood at some distance from the town. As soon as I was come near the house, I found an old gray-headed man next to the road, hoeing corn. I saw he was very aged man, and I thought it was my duty to converse with him. I stood by the fence and asked him how he did. He answered, “Well.” I asked him whether he was well within also. But he did not understand what I mean. (This old man was about ninety years of age and had been living without hope and without God in the world.) Immediately I went to the old man and spoke to him in a friendly manner, thus: “My friend,” said I to him, “you are a stranger to me, and I unto you; and I see that your head is full of gray hairs, and no doubt your days will soon be over.” “I know that,” said the aged man; “so everyone has got to be as I am.” “Well,” said I, “what do you think of the great day of judgment? Are you ready for that day?” “Oh, I don’t know,” said he. “I do sometimes think that I am too far off for that day.” “Why do you not now begin to make your peace with God, before death overtake you?” said I to the old man. “Repent and believe in the Son of God.” But the old man seemed to be very careless and stupid. I talked to him, but he kept hoeing his corn; and I followed him to the end of the field, pursuing my discourse, but he seemed to be unwilling to hear me any further, and I [...] bid him farewell.

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5. Dwight narrates Opukahaia’s death

About the commencement of the year 1818, Obookiah became seriously indisposed and was obliged to wholly abandon his studies. [...] It was soon found that his disease was the typhus fever [...] It became evident that his strength was wasting [...] He continued to decline until the night of the 17th of February, when his happy spirit was released and his joyful anticipations realized, that he should soon reach his Heavenly Father’s house. He was confined during his sickness, and came to his peaceful end, in the family of Rev. Timothy Stone, then the minister of the South Parish in Cornwall. [...]

He said to one of his countrymen, who had been a faithful nurse to him, “I must eat, or I can’t live,” and then inquired of him with anxiety, “Have you eat breakfast, William? How thankful

you ought to be that you have strength and can eat!” Soon he raised his hands and said, “Oh! how I want to see Hawaii! But I think I never shall—God will do right—he knows what is best!”—and burst into a flood of tears. “William, if you live to go home, remember me to my uncle.” [...]

The day before he died, after a distressing night and a bewildered state of mind, he appeared to have his reason perfectly and requested that his countrymen might be called. [...] When [they] had seated themselves around his bed, he addressed them most feelingly in his native language, as long as his strength would permit. As much of the address as could be recollected was afterwards written in English by one of his countrymen, and was essentially as follows:

“My dear countrymen, I wish to say something to you all— [...] I must beseech you to remember that you will follow me. Above all things, make your peace with God—you must make Christ your friend—you are in a strange land—you have no father—no mother to take care of you when you are sick—but God will be your friend if you put your trust in him—he has raised up friends for you and me [...].”

As death seemed to approach, Mrs. Stone said to him, “Henry, do you think you are dying?” He answered, “Yes, ma’am,” and then said, “Mrs. Stone, I thank you for your kindness.” She said, “I wish we might meet hereafter.” He replied, “I hope we shall,” and taking her hand, affectionately bade her farewell. [...] He shook hands with all his companions present and, with perfect composure, addressed to them the parting salutation of his native language, “*Alloah ò e*”—“My love be with you.”

Source:

1. E. W. Dwight, *Memoir of Henry Obookiah* [...], rev. ed. (New York: American Tract Society, 1835 [?]), 7-9, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b4350184>. Public domain, Google-digitized.
2. Dwight, *Memoir*, 13-15, 20-22, 26-27, 30-31, 34-35, 42-43, 51-52.
3. Dwight, *Memoir*, 39-41, 55-56, 58.
4. Dwight, *Memoir*, 64-66, 73-75.
5. Dwight, *Memoir*, 110, 113-115, 118-119.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section subheadings added by Duffy. A footnote in the source publication omitted. Quotation marks and attributions that, in the source, set Opukahaia's writing off from Dwight's have been omitted from these selections when a selection is entirely in Opukahaia's voice. Quotation marks have been omitted, as well, in one case where they indicated that Dwight was quoting briefly from another person's eyewitness account of Opukahaia's final days. For clarity and consistency of formatting, months have been inserted into the dates preceding entries from Opukahaia's diary, where elided in the source publication.

Paragraph breaks adjusted for readability and compactness. Spelling, punctuation, and typography (italics) modernized or Americanized, but instances of non-standard English syntax in Opukahaia's writing retained from the source publication. Use of vocative *O* vs. exclamatory *oh* regularized; *&c.* spelled out as *etc.* The words *catechism*, *missionary*, *divine*, and *holy scriptures*, capitalized in the source, have been converted here to lowercase.

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