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# A Missionary on a Mission: David Zeisberger and His Work with the Lenape People

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## **Abstract**

Devout Moravian missionary Ziesberger felt as though his sole purpose in life was to spare the “ignorant” Native Americans from being damned in Hell. Yet, Zeisberger used progressive and peaceful conversion means. He would forge the closest relationship to the Lenape people of any missionary. He would live within their communities, translate German and English hymns into the Lenape’s native language, publish several texts in Lenni Lenape, and host prayer services in Lenni Lenape. Zeisberger would use his devout devotion and passion to spread Christianity among the Lenape people. He would stand by them through trials and tribulations, which made Zeisberger unlike any other missionary. By many means conversion is deemed a heinous and vicious act, but Zeisberger’s intent was out of a genuine need to spare these people from being doomed to Hell.

*Keywords:* Lenape, Missionary, Moravian, Conversion

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How can forcing conversion onto a group of people possibly be justified? An eighteenth-century German Moravian missionary, David Zeisberger, felt as though it was his sole mission in life to convert the Lenape Native Americans from their native religion to Christianity. However, his incentives were not out of malicious intent, but rather, he truly believed he was saving their

souls from an eternal suffering. His conversion methods were not cruel, but employed the Lenape people's own language and culture. Zeisberger had formed the closest relationship with the Lenape people of any Moravian missionary. He lived with them and even went to the extent of learning their language. He then wrote the Christian hymns he felt the Lenape needed in the Lenni Lenape language. In modern times, it is not socially or morally acceptable to force conversion on a group of people. During Ziesberger's time, his actions were thought to be extremely progressive. He had been "saving" these people he believed to be "ignorant" from going to Hell. Zeisberger by no means was a cruel and abusive man, but rather felt it was his duty to convert the Lenape people in order to spare a group of people from suffering in their afterlives.

### **The Moravians:**

The Moravians who sought to convert the Lenape people stemmed from the Moravian Church. The Moravian Church had been a Protestant sect which originated from Moravia and Bohemia. Moravians were Christians and were some of the most passionate practitioners. Their religion entailed a very strict method of practicing their religion. The Moravians "every morning and evening... celebrated services that were based on the 'daily texts', biblical verses chosen for each day by lot" (Wessel 31). The Moravian practices were very precise and every day was devoted to a new set of prayers. They were a very organized group who wholeheartedly believed that their mission in life was to inform the uninformed. The Moravians knew that they needed to save the people of the world who were doomed to Hell if they were not converted. Was this passion derived because they felt a selfless desire to save these unknowledgeable people? Or perhaps was it because if they failed to spread Christianity, they would be failing to fulfill their

duty as a good Christian? Either way, due to this passion to save the “ignorant”, the Moravians sent missionaries to New World in order to “enlighten” people as to the power of God.

The Moravians emigrated to North America in 1741 and established the city of Bethlehem in Pennsylvania, which became the center of their activity in North America. Prior to the Moravians, there had been Christians who sought to convert others to Christianity, but many of the past conversion methods have been violent and murderous, like the Crusades. Other missionaries had been sent to Mexico in an attempt to convert the Aztecs, but used violence as their main conversion method. However, the Moravian missionaries in North America used predominantly peaceful conversion methods. For a long time the Moravians were the only white people who lived peacefully with indigenous people. The missionaries in Mexico lived among the Aztecs, but used force to do so. The “Moravian method of missionizing was to live among the indigenous peoples, try to learn the Native language, and accustom themselves to the Native way of life” (Wessel 31). This method of missionizing was revolutionary. Most conversion methods in the past forced not only the religion, but also the converter’s native language and culture. It is interesting to see that the Moravians lived alongside the Native Americans within their tribes and accepted their culture while also attempting to convert them. This technique allows for a sense of mutual respect among the people which may have helped diminish hostilities toward the Moravians allowing for smoother conversions.

### **The Lenape:**

Who exactly were these people facing this new type of conversion? What were their initial beliefs? How did they first react when they came in contact with the Europeans? The Moravians missionaries mainly focused their conversions on the Native Americans in North America. The specific group that David Zeisberger mainly interacted with was the Lenape tribe,

later known as the Delaware tribe. The Lenape during the seventeenth century “lived in what is now New Jersey, Delaware, Eastern Pennsylvania, and South Eastern New York” (Columbia Encyclopedia 1). Even with several neighboring tribes, the Lenape were a peaceful tribe. This peaceful nature was sure to have been related to their success as a tribe. They possessed their own language, which had been a dialect of Algonquian, which was also known as Lenni Lenape (Froom 1). The Lenape were a hunter-gatherer nomadic tribe who would hunt and harvest for part of the year and travel where their food would go. They occupied their settlements only for a short period time, which had been during the growing season. Some of the crops they grew during part of the year included: corn, beans, and squash. The Native Americans had not been as technologically advanced as the Europeans had been. They made their own materials and weapons using wood, horn, bone, and stone. There was a clear distinction between the roles of the women and the men within the Lenape culture. The women were to plant and harvest the crops while attending to their families and the men were to be the hunters and gatherers. The men would hunt fowl, fish, and gather various berries (Froom 1). The Lenape culture had very strict roles for its members which may have been why their tribes were such close communities.

Not only were the Lenape people’s daily lives vastly different from that of the Europeans, but so was their religion. Their beliefs were very spiritual. In fact, “much attention [had] been devoted to the significance of dreams and vision quests” (Gavaler 1). The Lenape would take great meaning in the naturalistic world and the spiritual world and use this as a guiding source through their religion. The Lenape did not view the afterlife as the Christians did. They believed that life was eternal. When a human life ended, it continued a another element (mainly those of nature). Zeisberger writes in his diary, “They consider the soul to be an invisible being and a spirit....They believe also in the immortality of the soul. Some likened themselves to corn which

when thrown out and buried in the soil comes up and grows. Some believe their souls to be in the sun and only their bodies here” (Zeisberger 131). The spiritualistic beliefs of the Lenape people had been practiced for countless generations which would make it difficult to abandon these traditions and practices. However, David Zeisberger would be quite persuasive with his conversion methods and would eventually be one of the most influential forces on the Lenape tribe.

**David Zeisberger:**

David Zeisberger is one of the least known, yet most influential missionaries to have ever emigrated to North America. He was born in 1721 and was baptized by the Moravian church in Eastern Moravia. Later, his “family moved to Herrnhut, Saxony, a place of refuge provided by Count Nicholas Zinzendorf” (Pickett 77). Zeisberger would become an active member of the Moravian church which would inspire his emigration to The New World. Zeisberger emigrated to Georgia in 1736, but would not arrive in Bethlehem until 1740, which would soon be the main Moravian settlement of North America (Pickett 77). His arrival in Bethlehem would be just the beginning of his time in North America. There he learned the Moravian conversion methods that would assist him during his time among the Native American people.

Following Zeisberger’ ordination as Moravian minister in Bethlehem, he began his life among the Native Americans. Zeisberger truly believed that his sole purpose in life was to save the lives of the ignorant Native Americans from burning in Hell. He felt it was personally his mission to venture from tribe to tribe in an attempt to spare as many lives as possible. This he certainly did. Missionary David Zeisberger became close to several Native American tribes. He spent the first part of his life converting the Onondaga Iroquois but would be better known for

his work with the Lenape people. For the second half of his life he focused all of his conversion efforts to the Lenape (Wessel 35).

Zeisberger's conversion methods were very different from his fellow Moravians. All Moravian missionaries would live among the Lenape; however, Zeisberger would live within the the closest proximity to the Lenape, therefore allowing him to spend a significantly greater amount of his time with them (Wessel 34). His choice to live closest to the Lenape demonstrates a passion that his peers often lacked. Zeisberger went to extremes to convert the Lenape people, by not forcing them to accept his culture and language, but by appealing to the Lenape culture and language. Because he lived among the Lenape, he was able to become fluent in Lenni Lenape. Zeisberger would translate the hymns he deemed to be most important from the German bible into Lenni Lenape. This text would be known as *A Collection of Hymns for Use of the Delaware*. Providing the Lenape with these newly translated hymn books gave Zeisberger the opportunity to teach to them in their native language. This was a sign of respect. Zeisberger acknowledged that these people had not been able to read or speak German. The effort he put forth in translating the most crucial of religious hymns from German to Lenni Lenape was a clear gesture of kindness to help the Lenape people. The first line in *A Collection of Hymns for Use of the Delaware* reads, "I beg leave to dedicate to you a collection of Hymns in the Delaware language, translated from the newest German and English hymnbooks of our Church, and request the favor of you to cause it to be printed for the use of the Indian congregations"(Zeisberger Preface). In this opening statement Zeisberger is requesting for the Moravian Church to print more hymn books. This was not for his personal conversions, but for the benefit of the Native American tribes across North America. No other Moravian missionary devoted the time to translate the most important psalms and hymns from the bible into a foreign

language for a people they deemed ignorant. This does not seem to be the act of a wicked man, but of a man who feels as though he is the one hope these people have of being saved. Zeisberger is doing all in his power to do what he believes is benefiting the Lenape people.

After having translated these hymns into Lenni Lenape Zeisberger held services for his newly titled converts, “Christian Indians”. Zeisberger writes in his diary how, “daily services were held, and we ceased not to exhort the brethren, to encourage them, to comfort them, and to point out the Savior” (Zeisberger 3). Zeisberger used encouragement during his services to show the Lenape that they are being given the opportunity to save themselves and convert to Christianity. His encouragement was certainly a key aspect in the persuasion of the Lenape people. Using kindness and special religious services in Lenni Lenape for the Lenape people was an attempt to show them that Zeisberger wanted to help them, not for his sake, but for their own. As Zeisberger’s group of Christian Indians grew, more and more services were held daily. Another key aspect of his conversion methods was that he told the Lenape people about God and his power, and that Zeisberger would help pray to God to save the Lenape people. In *A Collection of Hymns for Use of the Delaware* he writes, “May God our Saviour, who is the Saviour also of the heathen, grant his blessing to this work, that people who formerly did not know him, but now, through the power of his saving name, has been turned from darkness to light... I am confident, dear brethren, that you will esteem this a sufficient recompense for the expense of publication” (Zeisberger Preface).

Here it is shown Zeisberger is reaching out to his Brethren in Bethlehem to help save these people. He wanted to do all he could possibly do to ensure that the Christian Indians would be spared from Hell. Thus, he reaches out for his fellow brethren to pray as well and pay for the publication of these hymn books. Zeisberger prays for God to save these people because he

knows they did not intentionally disrespect him but were simply unaware of his existence.

Zeisberger becomes an advocate for the Lenape people to God.

Due to Zeisberger's dedication and residing with the Lenape people, he had the strongest relationship with them, which would last until his death when few Lenape were left. Zeisberger experienced many circumstances, both triumphs and challenges with these people. The Lenape people had been a community-oriented society and through Zeisberger's conversion methods, he would not disrupt that.

During Zeisberger's time with the Lenape he kept a diary which he documented almost every day he spent with them. On August thirteenth 1781, he writes, "we heard that a strong party of warriors was on the march for our towns, on which account also we could not have the Lord's Supper, although we had prepared ourselves therefor, for on their account we could no longer be easy, they having already begun to assemble in Salem and Gnadenhutzen. Up to the 16th and 17th three hundred warriors had assembled" (Zeisberger 3). Zeisberger writes of his time with the Lenape when they had to prepare for battles during the Revolutionary war. Included in this text is the mention of the "Lord's Supper" meaning that Zeisberger and his men ate together on a regular basis to celebrate the Lord. This would again strengthen their sense of community. Also, they had to ban together in difficult and dangerous times of war in order to stay united. If the Lenape had not agreed to Zeisberger's conversion or simply had not liked him they certainly would not be eating a religious dinner with him regularly and banning together fend off intruding warriors. If an individual is hated or forceful revolt is bound to occur. The most vulnerable times tend to be times of revolt, but here Zeisberger again, seems to be a genuine soul who deeply cares for the Lenape, thus no need for a revolt from the Lenape.

Zeisberger's impact on the Lenape had been greater than he could possibly fathom, but the Lenape had a strong impact on him as well. Zeisberger wrote several texts and books about his time with the Lenape people including *A Grammar of the Language of the Lenni Lenape*. In this book are hundreds, if not thousands of Lenni Lenape words and phrases that he had learned after studying Lenni Lenape. He shared the Lenape language with the people of Europe and Asia. Zeisberger writes, "this work was left incomplete, being confined to the languages of Europe and Asia" (Zeisberger 1). He writes of how the world had been missing a significant and influential piece of language, Lenni Lenape. Only European and Asian languages have been studied, but Zeisberger believes how the Lenape language could open a new door in linguistic and philosophical studies.

Additionally, he was so fascinated by his time with the Lenape that he documented almost every day he spent with them in his diary, which has since been published. In his diary are the times spent with the Lenape which demonstrate all the hardships they endured together. He also wrote books about the Lenape as a people and culture in his book, *History of the Northern American Indians*. Zeisberger describes the Lenape people as "middle size, well built, straight, light-footed, well adapted for travel through the forest much of which is due to the fact that they do no heavy work but support themselves by the chase." (Zeisberger 12). His descriptions show his immense fascination of these new people and that he does not insult the Lenape in his descriptions.

However, not only did the Lenape influence Zeisberger, but he influenced them, and strongly contributed to the the destruction of their religion and culture. The German missionaries had only intended to show the Lenape of the powers of God and beauty of Christianity, but their work resulted in the destruction of the indigenous culture and changes in the new faith of

Christian Indians. Their newly founded religious presence and influence led to many transformations (Wessel 33). The new implementation of Christianity flushed out the Lenape religion and many of its cultural practices. The Christian Indians would eventually move with the missionaries and abandon their Lenape traditions to pursue the new Christian European lifestyle. Because the Lenape were so tightly knit a group, it was not long before practically all Lenape tradition had been forgotten and this is was partly due to the Moravian missionaries. Zeisberger's powerful persuasion converted many Christian Indians which helped abandon the Lenape culture.

David Zeisberger had been a devout man who had a burning passion to help others from what he believed to be a punishment worse than death itself. Zeisberger used his religious practices and conversion methods to save the Lenape people from a doomed eternity. There was an overall mutual desire to help these people in the new world among all of the Moravian missionaries. Even with Zeisberger's and his fellow missionaries' good intentions, what would result in their spread of Christianity was the diminishment of the Lenape religion and culture. A great number of the Lenape were swayed by the persuasive and impressive Moravian missionaries. Thus, resulting in the Lenape people abandoning the Lenape religion and culture for Christianity, which would inevitably be the downfall of the Lenape culture.

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