

# Story: 'Opukaha'ia

February 18, 2024

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

Usually I tell you stories about birds. Sometimes I tell you stories about other kinds of creatures, like honu. Sometimes I tell you stories about trees and seeds, and once or twice about clouds. And from time to time, I tell you stories about people, young people and older people.

And I make these stories up.

Today I'm going to tell you a story that I didn't make up, although I'm putting the words together for it. It's about a real person who lived and died over two hundred years ago, someone whose life made an enormous difference for you and for me. His name was 'Opukaha'ia.

He was born not terribly far from here in Ka'u. His early life was a sad one. There were wars as Kamehameha I sought to rule all the Hawaiian Islands, and in one of those wars 'Opukaha'ia's parents and siblings were killed. He was taken in first by one of Kamehameha's warriors, and later by an uncle, who was a priest of the Hawaiian gods. The uncle raised 'Opukaha'ia to become a priest as well.

One day 'Opukaha'ia visited an American ship anchored offshore, and decided that he wanted to leave Hawai'i, feeling like he had lost his connection with his home with the death of his immediate family. His uncle, I should say, didn't want him to go. There were two young Hawaiians on the ship, as a young man named Thomas Hopu had already signed on as a cabin boy. The ship made a long voyage, first to Alaskan waters to collect cargo, then to China to sell cargo and take on different cargo, and then all the way around the southern tip of Africa before making their way to the east coast of North America. The ship's captain invited 'Opukaha'ia to stay with him at his home in New Haven. New Haven, as it happened, was the site of Yale College, which taught math, science, literature, law – and religion.

The story goes that the young man was sitting on the steps of the main college building when a senior named Edwin Dwight came along and asked him if he wanted to learn. 'Opukaha'ia wanted to learn very badly, and Edwin Dwight became his tutor. I'm not sure when he adopted the English name Henry. When the ship's captain had to leave for another voyage, Edwin Dwight found Henry 'Opukaha'ia another host with a relative named Timothy Dwight. He was, at the time, President of Yale College.

It took some years for Henry 'Opukaha'ia to accept baptism and membership in the Christian Church, but not because he was slow to believe. He devoured study of Christianity just as eagerly as he ate up study of the English language with a series of mentors and tutors. He wasn't sure of his own soul. He took it very seriously. He didn't want to sadden God by falling away from his faith.

I don't think he did make God sad, by the way.

He had a tremendous influence on the brand-new missionary movement in New England. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was founded just a year after Henry 'Opukaha'ia landed in New Haven. Originally, they planned to send missionaries to India and Sri Lanka. 'Opukaha'ia made them consider Hawai'i, in great part because he was willing, available, and training to go as a missionary who spoke the language. In 1820, just ten years after the founding of the organization, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions landed its first missionary company here on this island, over in Kona.

Sadly, Henry 'Opukaha'ia was not with them. He contracted a disease and in those days there was no effective treatment for it. He died at age 26 in Cornwall, Connecticut. Nearly his last words were, "Aloha o'e."

*by Eric Anderson*