

Mennonite Templars in Russia

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We have probably all heard of the Knights Templar, who had some connection with the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries. Traces of this order, which was part of a widespread attempt to regain access to the holy places in Jerusalem and Palestine, can still be found in the Middle East, around the Mediterranean, and in Germany. The movement to which I will refer is not related in any real sense to that earlier organisation, although both are part of a long tradition which goes back to early Hebrew history and is still alive in Zionism and various eschatological interpretations in the Christian churches. In the following I would like to comment on the nature and development of the 19th century German Temple Movement and its relationship to Mennonite history.

There have been a number of studies of the German Temple, for example the exhaustive book by Friedrich Lange and, for our purposes, the book in Arnold Dyck's historical series by Heinrich Sawatzky, *Templer mennonitischer Herkunft*.¹ But such studies, and indeed their subject matter, have remained very much on the fringe of Mennonite studies per se, and this, I believe, has much to do with the reception of this movement by Mennonite historians, who have walked a wide circle around this awkward curiosity. In an article on Eduard Wüst and the Temple Movement, I have suggested that there would be good reason to explore more fully and carefully what in fact happened in that development and, more importantly, to ask why it took place, because it seems to me that there is something to be learned there about the nature of the Russian Mennonite community itself in the mid-19th century — and, for that matter, beyond that into our own time.² In this brief paper I would like to pursue two questions: (1) What was the German Temple movement in its origin and development? and (2) Why and to what degree did it become part of Russian Mennonite history?

One of the chief problems in the historical reception of the Temple Movement has been the lack of clarity about its origins. It is usually referred to as a quasi-religious but de facto 'cultural' organisation which

cannot be taken seriously in theological terms. This is the case because the historians' reference is to what the Temple *ultimately became* rather than to the process and intention of its origin. I would like to focus a little more closely on the specifics of the origin, which then will help us to understand the whole phenomenon more fully.

Very briefly it can be stated that the religious world of Württemberg in the late 18th century bore the stamp of the particular Pietism of Johann Albrecht Bengel, a theologian who stressed a specific eschatology and went so far as to calculate the date of the return of Christ for either 1816 or 1836.³ Although it exhibited such particular characteristics, Bengel's Pietism remained very much within the traditional church structure, but toward the end of the century Pietist groups began to leave the church, when it was felt that that institution had given in too much to the rationalistic spirit of the age. These separated groups proliferated to the point that steps had to be taken to counteract this dissipation. One such step was the fact that the King of Württemberg allowed the formation of the settlement of Korntal, a Brüdergemeinde community which thereafter became a focal point for separated groups, but also functioned with the sanction of the authorities.⁴

It is necessary, when speaking of the 19th century scene, to distinguish between the "old" and "new" Pietism, between the traditional Pietism, which after all had been around since the early 17th century in Arndt and Spener, and the *Erweckungsbewegung* or Revival Movement of the 19th century. Traditional Pietism had operated quite successfully within the church structure and that structure had accommodated itself to this movement, but by the turn of the 19th century there were more or less severe dislocations of individuals, groups and separations which changed the nature of the religious landscape of Württemberg and, indeed, of Europe.

Such separated groups were much more susceptible to outside influences, like that of the Darbyists and Methodists, who were very active in Germany at the time. Conditioned by the eschatological theology of Bengel, these groups readily adopted the popular critique of the Enlightenment espoused by Jung-Stilling⁵ and sought ways of withdrawing from the secularizing process which was taking hold in western Europe and which had found its most drastic and dramatic expression in the French Revolution.

As early as 1817 whole communities left Württemberg — where crop failures no doubt helped them to decide on such radical action — and travelled to the East, to the realms of the Russian Czar, who, as a Christian ruler, would provide them with a place of refuge until the return of Christ. That their motivation for relocating was at least partly religious is clear from the evidence of the period. Here is an excerpt from a document circulated in 1816, calling for a religious emigration to the East:

[Its title:] "Call to the Children of God, or Believers, who are anxiously waiting for the prophesied and soon-appearing Kingdom of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and who wish to come into the same." [It goes on to say:] "From all the past and real happenings and on the basis of the Old and New Testaments of God's Word and in view of the old and new calenders, we perceive (as our Lord Jesus, our Master and King called us to do) that the noble and glorious time of the foretold will suddenly be with us, in which the Lord Jesus, our Great King, will gather together in a place of refuge of his choosing, his elect and foremost, or the Bride clothed by the sun, out of all the nations of the earth, until the just anger of God will fall upon the children of unbelief, and then will lead them into the New Jerusalem, in which we will celebrate the Sabbath of a Thousand Years."⁶

This appeal goes on to deal with both spiritual and practical matters related to the planned emigration and lists a number of points on which agreement must be reached to ensure a harmonious undertaking.

These groups indeed proceeded to relocate in Russian and there formed a number of German villages north of the Black Sea. When Pastor Wüst went out to these places in 1845 he found that they had largely forgotten their original rationale and had become rather well-to-do and comfortable on the Russian steppe.⁷ His preaching soon led to revival and unrest, as we know. But let us return to Württemberg to see how these ideas progressed there.

The French Revolution had ultimately led to a conservative reaction in the German states under Metternich, a so-called 'restoration' which lasted from 1815 onward. Another French Revolution in June of 1830 set off a new reaction in the German states. In typical reverse fashion, French action led to German thought, and the result was several decades of so-called *Vormärz* debate and writing, running the gamut from theory to poetry and from theology to politics. One striking example is the critical study of the life of Jesus by David Friedrich Strauss, a radical application of rationalism to the Gospel record. Such books faced a strong reaction, especially in Württemberg, where Pietism was strongly established. A very lively and indeed bitter debate arose and was carried on in the papers and journals of the day. One of the defenders of Strauss, who pledged himself to fight lustily for academic freedom (and consequently lost his tenure!) attacked the Pietists from his lectern and was subsequently counter-attacked by a number of clergymen. It was in this particular debate, in a counterblast directed at this academic, the philosopher Fr. Th. Vischer, that the name of Christof Hoffmann first arises.⁸

Hoffmann came from a very prominent Pietist family, his father having established Korntal and his brother later becoming the leading ecclesiast at the Prussian court. Christof Hoffmann felt that the evangelical church was not defending itself with enough vigor, and so, together with some friends, he founded a new journal called the *Süddeutsche*

Warte,⁹ in order to do what the other papers were, in his opinion, not doing.

In some ways what Hoffmann set out to do is parallel to what Jung-Stilling had attempted fifty years earlier, that is, to attack rationalism with some of its own tools. For, although Hoffmann denounced Strauss' critical approach, in some ways his own later position was very comparable to that of his opponent. Both Hoffmann and his friends the brothers Paulus started from a position which is very understandable in historical hindsight: they combined their acute awareness of the times in which they lived and their own 'modern' education with the eschatology of Bengel, which was after all their tradition. Like many Germans, they felt that the time had come for action and this set them apart from the traditional Pietists. What the revival movement of Hofacker and others awakened in them was an acute awareness of how the eschatological landscape described by Jung-Stilling fit their view of contemporary Europe. This combination of old and new elements gave Hoffman a program, although its development took many years. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that, had he and his colleagues not run into the kind of opposition that they did, that development would have been very different indeed. But that is to second-guess history!

After starting the *Süddeutsche Warte* in 1845, Hoffmann became active in several spheres. He was elected to the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848 and was said to be the only 'pietist' there. He also had contact with a mission school in Switzerland which promoted the evangelisation of the Holy Land.¹⁰ At the same time his group founded an Evangelical Society which by 1850 had 450 branches throughout the south German countryside.¹¹ In 1851 his group took the name "Society for the Gathering of the People of God in Jerusalem", which by its very title suggests a program. Adherents of this Society are properly called "Friends of Jerusalem" (*Jerusalemsfreunde*). At a meeting in 1854 Hoffmann declared:

The question [thus] arises: what shall be done? To this I answer: we must return to the Word of God. We must strive to achieve a position, based on God's Word and not upon human thoughts. The return to the Law of God will ensure us deliverance from our plight and fulfilment of the blessed prophecies of God. If we want to gather ourselves as a people of God, the place where this is to be done is not unimportant. The place, according to the saying of the Holy Scriptures, is Jerusalem.¹²

There seemed to be no possibility at that time to actually relocate to Jerusalem and a small tract of land near Stuttgart, the Kirschenhardthof, was purchased and used in the meantime for schools and for occasional 'gatherings'. The Templer schools deserve particular mention because all the evidence suggests that they were very good — and this is the chief

point of contact between the German Templers and the Russian Mennonites.

In order to prepare for a general relocation to the Holy Land a petition was presented to the Confederation of German States, but this was twice rejected out of hand. The group also faced rejection and increasing hostility from the state church and also from the various pietist groups.¹³ Ultimately Hoffmann and his group were excommunicated from the *Landeskirche* in 1859. In 1861 the organisation's name was changed to *Der Deutsche Tempel* and the *Süddeutsche Warte* to *Warte des Tempels*. Hoffmann became bishop. A confession of faith was issued in 1864. Not until 1868 was it possible for emigration to Palestine to take place, but then groups did leave and founded settlements in Jaffa, Haifa and finally in or near Jerusalem itself. Christof Hoffmann himself lived out his last years there.

One would have to pay more careful attention to what happened between 1844 and 1858 than can be done here to discuss the changes which resulted ultimately in the Tempel being what it became. When it began it was not even eccentric by Würtemberg standards and its concentration on good Christian education gave every indication of a wholesome development for the movement. Very laudable are its efforts to come to grips with the *whole* of modern life. Like the early Mennonite Brethren these people decried the spiritual decay of their society, but they saw also the grave consequences of the radical restructuring of society by an early capitalist economy. Where some earlier "old" Pietists had been quite content to play the entrepreneurial game and, for example, exploit child labor, the discussions of the "Friends of Jerusalem" suggest attempts to find new models for a more just society. Even Karl Marx was paraphrased in some of their discussions.¹⁴ In any case, when the Mennonite student Johannes Lange attended the Templer school at Kirschenhardthof for three years he received some of these impulses and it was precisely the notion that some changes in the structure of society were required that caused an angry reaction from the Mennonite church elders in Russia.

The events in Gnadenfeld in the Molotschna leading up to the separation in 1863 are well documented in Franz Isaac's *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* of 1908.¹⁵ Even more clearly than P. M. Friesen, Isaac put the evidence on the record and then made his own pointed comments on these developments. One cannot avoid a sense of *déjà vu* in following first the Mennonite Brethren and then the Templar separation, both in Gnadenfeld and both coming in the wake of the disturbing influence of Eduard Wüst. Mennonite historiography has kept these two developments as separate as possible, but from our perspective the similarities are strong enough to suggest that there are common features here which should be recognized as such.

Both movements began by finding the spiritual condition of the colonists to be wanting — the descriptions are very similar. The critics were looking at the same thing, but they must have had some similarity in perspective as well! Both appealed to Menno specifically and wanted to remain Mennonite.¹⁶ Both left only reluctantly when they were opposed by the church leadership. The most obvious difference is that the latter emphasized the education of the young (a Templar characteristic) while the Brethren, who are referred to as *Hüpfers*, took hold of the “free grace” doctrine. Both of these elements can be seen to be two poles of Wüst’s teaching, and so he may be called a kind of step-father to both movements.

From the documents it can be seen that the Templar movement did not introduce a radically new teaching in Gnadenfeld. The exotic connotation of the Templar name did not in itself become a factor in the decisive events leading up to 1863. Rather, it was the youthful enthusiasm of Johannes Lange and his bold entry into the religious discussion, which made the church leadership nervous and ultimately forced the issue. What Lange had said in the two letters he wrote from Germany to Mennonite church leaders was largely the same as what the concern of the Brethren had been.¹⁷ But, influenced by the Wüst situation and the approach taken in the *Süddeutsche Warte*, Lange used some terms which came back to haunt him with a vengeance. He spoke there of a “new order which must be brought into being,” which may be basically revolutionary language, but nonetheless in keeping with the New Testament. Here is some of his analysis:

It is clear and is becoming clearer daily . . . that the present order of society is dissolving and that in the future, both in religious and social terms, order will only be possible in two categories. The two sides are the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and the realm of the Beast of the Abyss. Both realms are already present in their beginnings and on earth there will continue to be separation, forming of parties, confusion and disorder until the whole of mankind has placed itself on one side or to the other . . .

The new order consists of our ministers becoming like the prophets and our physicians like the apostles, that our leaders become like Moses and David and that our families become like the first Christians . . .¹⁸

Lange’s message indeed is one of revival, but not of the purely inner kind, but rather of a faith that leads directly to action. What that action should be, precisely, remains and remained unclear and indeed in following the developments both in Württemberg and Russia one cannot escape the feeling that the ultimate programmes (inasmuch as they can be called that) followed not so much from the ideas as that *it was felt that something had to be done*, and so the movement to the Holy Land and the establishment of colonies there was in due time carried out.

I think the point must be made, however, that from a reading of P.

M. Friesen, Franz Isaac and the other available sources it cannot be concluded that the Templars separated in 1863 because of an unorthodox theology. Rather, much like the earlier exit of the Brethren, it was a case of a new initiative which was considered dangerous to the established churches' sense of order and tranquility. Again and again Lange and his friends were asked: "What do you mean by the words: a new world order?" To which Lange's answer was: "I mean the Kingdom of God in its full sense. I call it 'new' because everyone who lives in it is born again and I call it a 'world order' because, according to the prophet Isaiah the Kingdom of God will encompass the whole world."¹⁹

Also, the fact that Lange carried on Bible teaching apart from his regular school teaching was considered a threat to order, although none of those who had gone to hear him had any error to report.

There can be no doubt, though, that if the teaching was orthodox during this period, it was at the same time in touch with the Württemberg perspective, where there was a pressure for some kind of concrete action. In 1858 Hoffmann ceremoniously declared the exit of the Friends of Jerusalem from the *Landeskirche*. In the same year several *Kundschafter* (scouts) were sent to the Holy Land to prepare for resettlement. In time groups of people moved to Jaffa and Jerusalem and in Russia there was a sense that events related to the end time were actually taking place! The date for the return of Christ was projected by some for 1878. And yet, relatively few Mennonite Templars went to the Holy Land, which suggests that that part of the teaching never was as strong in the Russian scene.

The result in Russia after the separation of 1863 is manifold in its events and should not be oversimplified. Nikolai Schmidt, Johannes Lange and others founded Templar Mennonite settlements in the Kuban and Caucasus areas, which in time — like good Mennonite settlements — prospered. Lange remained in Russia and devoted himself to the leadership of the group, along with Nikolai Schmidt. His brother, Friedrich Lange, accompanied the Württemberg leaders of the Temple movement to the Holy Land and remained there, writing the voluminous account of the movement which was published in Jerusalem in 1899.

The fate of the German Templar movement in the 20th century, though a fascinating story, is another one that will not be entered upon here.²⁰ Remnants remain in Australia and Germany, and even Winnipeg is home to individuals who could tell much about the movement. But that is another story. In recent years the renewed study of the origin of the Mennonite Brethren church has raised the question (among others) as to whether that break was really beneficial or indeed necessary? That is an understandable corrective to earlier interpretations. Similarly, one may well question whether the Templar separation was necessary. Earlier historians have simply dismissed the Mennonite Templars as having

been "infected by error."²¹ From the available evidence it appears very likely that what the Gnadenfeld church had on its hands in the person of Johannes Lange was a bright, well-motivated and relatively well-educated young man who felt (as does every new generation) that change and renewal were called for. The rigidity of the elders in league with the other officials in the power structure was such that it drove away Lange and many others who could have made a positive contribution to the spiritual and cultural life of a very closed, conservative society, as P. M. Friesen has eloquently lamented.²²

It is true that in the course of time some things changed and, for example, the baptism of believers doctrine was modified (by accepting the children whose parents were baptized). And eventually the whole movement came to a position not unlike that of its earliest opponents of the "critical school"! But in the 19th century context the Mennonite Templars continued to consider themselves Mennonite and carried on some strong links with other Mennonites for a long time. It is surely not proper that they should be written off the page of Mennonite history, as for example in the new exhaustive Mennonite Bibliography in two volumes which has only one entry on the Mennonite Templars!²³ It is important that we try to understand this movement, not only for what it tells us about them, but also for what it says about the Mennonite church and community of that time and later.

As far as the Templar idea is concerned, it should be clear that it was actually typical rather than atypical of the mid-19th century scene. As I have tried to point out the movement which separated from the Mennonite Church in 1863 was in many ways little more than a reform movement with an educational emphasis.

A recent book characterizing the religious groups which settled the Canadian Prairies found its common denominator in the same Biblical imagery which engaged the German Templars in the mid-19th century. It is called: *Visions of the New Jerusalem*.²⁴ These groups include not only Mennonites and Doukhobors but also Catholics and Lutherans and even the native people, suggesting that in the course of time this so-called "vision" had become a commonplace rather than an eccentricity.

In conclusion I would like to summarize my answers to the questions about the origin of the German Temple movement and its Mennonite connection. In its origin the movement was an exciting, though no doubt rash attempt to combine the theological tradition of Bengel and Jung-Stilling with the political and educational world of mid-19th century Germany. Strong negative reactions from all sides, and especially from groups with a similar interest, drove the movement into a fortress mentality and ultimately to becoming almost the opposite of what it had set out to be. Mennonites in Russia who were interested in a revitalisation of their communities through education — including religious education —

were attracted to this emphasis of the Friends of Jerusalem. Somewhat like their Württemberg counterparts, the Russian Mennonite Templars were harshly rejected by a rigid and autocratic church and community leadership. Apart from the perceived threat to church, law, and order, there was a certain degree of skepticism about a phenomenon which was, after all, in a sense "foreign" to them. The "Hoffmannites" were felt to be an unknown quantity.

The German Templar movement never got close to rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, but the fact that a fine house was built on the outskirts of that city by no less than the Russian Mennonite Nikolai Schmidt of Gnadenfeld is a certain kind of commentary on how one religious world imprinted upon another.

Notes

¹Friedrich Lange, *Geschichte des Tempels* (Jerusalem, 1899); Heinrich Sawatzky, *Templer mennonitischer Herkunft* (Winnipeg, 1955).

²The problems of "leadership" and "authority", which played such a prominent role in the decisive actions in rural Russia, seem to be no less problematic in urban America.

³See Erich Beyreuter, *Geschichte des Pietismus* (Stuttgart, 1978), p. 250f. Also Harry Loewen (ed.), *Mennonite Images* (Winnipeg, 1980), p. 119 fn. 71.

⁴There was consequently a complex arrangement of religious establishments, both Catholic and Protestant and within the latter a variety of more or less "established" churches. See Heinrich Hermelink, *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirche in Württemberg von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart/Tübingen, 1949), and H. Lehmann, *Pietismus und weltliche Ordnung in Württemberg vom 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1969).

⁵See Max Geiger, *Aufklärung und Erweckung. Beiträge zur Erforschung Johann Heinrich Jung-Stillings und der Erweckungstheologie* (Zürich, 1963). Also my "From Jung-Stilling to Rudy Wiebe" in *Mennonite Images*, pp. 202f.

⁶Cited from Hans Petri, "Zur Geschichte der Auswanderung aus Württemberg nach Russland,; *Blätter für Württembergische Kirchengeschichte* (1957/58), 375. Translation mine.

⁷See Wüst's letter published in the *Süddeutsche Warte* XI (1855), 50: "The 'fleshly' part of their chiliasm has been cooled off by time; indeed, even more: a good number of them have made themselves so comfortable on the generous and fruitful Russian steppe that they remind one of those who are referred to in the Revelation as 'inhabitants of earth'." Translation mine.

⁸"Einundzwanzig Sätze gegen Gottesleugner" (1844), and other essays.

⁹See my description in "Eduard Wüst und Jerusalem", *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April, 1982), 172f.

¹⁰According to some sources this was St. Chrischona.

¹¹*Württembergische Kirchengeschichte* (Calwer Verlagsverein, 1893), p. 630.

¹²"Apokalyptische Stimmungen des sozialen Chiliasmus in Schwaben. Der Ludwigsburger Ausschuss für Sammlung des Volkes Gottes in Jerusalem", *Monatsblätter für innere Zeitgeschichte* V (1855), 393/4.

¹³*Württembergische Kirchengeschichte* (Calwer Verlagsverein, 1893), p. 630.

¹⁴"Die Arbeit des Menschen ist allein geeignet, Werthe hervorzubringen: — das Capital an sich ist todt, und nicht tauglich, Werthe zu produzieren, es muss demselben seine zinstragende Kraft entzogen, und der Zins (Wucher) abgeschafft werden . . ." *Süddeutsche Warte* (Sept. 7, 1854).

¹⁵The book is subtitled: "Aus Akten älterer und neuerer Zeit, wie auch auf Grund eigener Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen dargestellt."

¹⁶See P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia 1789-1910* (Winnipeg, 1978),

p. 232, and Franz Isaac, p. 237; "Wir wollen nicht von den Mennoniten ausgehen; das sei ferne! Auch wollen wir unsere mennonitischen Grundsätze und Gebräuche nicht ändern, soweit sie aufs Wort Gottes sich gründen, wir wollen durch unsere Absonderung nur uns bewahren von fremden, mennonitischen Grundsätzen gefährlichen Einflüssen; wir wollen fest gegründet aufs Wort Gottes mit allen unsern Mennonitenbrüdern, welche noch an Menno Simonis Lehre festhalten und Leben und Wandel darnach einrichten, in Liebe und Eintracht verbunden bleiben . . ."

¹⁷Both refer specifically to the low quality of spiritual life in the colonies.

¹⁸*Süddeutsche Warte* (1861), 54.

¹⁹Franz Isaac, p. 211, Punkt 3.

²⁰For this see N. Arndt, *Erinnerungen eines Oliginoers* (2. Aufl. Melbourne, 1977) unpubl. ms (M.B. archives, Winnipeg).

²¹As for example one of the 18 original Brethren, Jacob P. Bekker, whose account, *Origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, 1973) uses this expression several times.

²²P. M. Friesen, p. 108.

²³H. Sawatzky, which is no. 13247.

²⁴Ben Smillie, *Visions of the New Jerusalem: Religious Settlement on the Prairies* (Edmonton, 1983).

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