

# **Mysteries of the Kingdom: More or Less**



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William L. Knecht

It is the purpose of this note to report upon the background of a pre-1800 practice of proxy baptism in America. While interesting in itself, the matter is of especial interest to students of “Mormonism” because of that group’s belief that the Spirit of Elijah moved upon the face of the land and influenced many persons to greater respect for and interest in their ancestors.

In writing of Joseph Smith,<sup>1</sup> Fawn M. Brodie suggests that many of the sacred things of Mormondom—the mysteries of the Kingdom—are mere borrowings, if not outright thefts, from other and prior practices. She suggests, for instance, that Joseph Smith found the color, the spectacle and the intrigue necessary to establish himself as leader in Mormondom, in the temple rites which, it is alleged, he copied freely from Masonry.<sup>2</sup> After identifying the source of his inspiration for all other parts of the temple rites,<sup>3</sup> she summarily explains away the origin of the vicarious aspects of temple work:

Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians had made an ambiguous reference to baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29), and at least one German sect had practiced this ritual in Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup>

We will here survey the background of the “one German sect . . . in Pennsylvania.” The only group which this writer can identify, who have practiced baptism for the dead,<sup>5</sup> were an offshoot branch of the Dunkers (or less frequently the Tunkers or Dippers) or Brethren, by the preferred appellation.

The Dunkers grew from a meeting of mind and heart of eight men and women: George Grebi, Lucas Vetter, Alexander Mack, Andreas Bone, Johannes Kipping, Johanna Nothingerin Bone, Anna Mack and Johanna Kipping. These people met, at real risk to their persons, to say nothing of their property, at the home of Alexander Mack in Schwarzenau in Germany in the early 1700’s to study and commune together, feeling that the formality and dogma of the state church denied them the liberty which should be accorded the conscience.

But be not ye called Rabbi; for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are Brethren. (Matthew 23:8).

From this reference these people drew their name.<sup>6</sup> And from the spirit of this relationship they drew much of their church government. The

Brethren trace a thread of sympathetic thought back to 1521 and the Zwickau prophets in the province of Saxony, who taught adult baptism and the second coming of Christ. Such doctrines spread through Switzerland, Franconia and Thuringia. Adherents took an active part in the Peasants' War but were overwhelmingly defeated at Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525. Though Emperor Charles V issued an edict to destroy all members of this group, some evaded the eradication order by fleeing to Holland.<sup>7</sup>

Independent groups kept the movement alive, chiefly in Northern Germany, Holland and Switzerland. One of the best known groups, the Mennonites, grew around Menno Simons (1496–1561)<sup>8</sup> of Schwarzenau. The group of eight first mentioned, studied the New Testament for some time and engaged in prayer, seeking light and knowledge. After some time passed, the group finally felt prepared and went in solitude early one morning to a nearby body of water, drew lots, and one was baptized. He baptized another, and was in turn baptized by the second, seeking, we must suppose, to reinforce the efficacy of the first baptism.<sup>9</sup> Then the remaining six were immersed. All this took place in the year 1708.

Despite the persecution of officialdom the group gained adherents, many of whom joined the growing tide of immigrants to America. These immigrants presented a most diverse portrait of the humanity that was Europe. They came singly, and in groups, reinforced and strengthened by the association of neighbors and friends from the homeland. Some were known as Pietists or Enthusiasts,<sup>10</sup> and these, with the followers of Menno Simons, came thither to live in peace with the world and worship the Almighty. Others professed Quakerism, and sought to find peace apart from the world. Some wanted not only to be left alone, but wanted freedom to practice their positive dogma. Johann Kelpius and his band of Pietists settled on the banks of the Wissahickon in 1794, and were known as the "Society of the Woman in the Wilderness." The Labadists in the latter part of the 18th century settled in the Bohemia Manor in Maryland and founded a monastic community. At this time, also, came the Mennonites and the Dunkers. The chief difference between the latter groups is that the former administered baptism by sprinkling, while the latter believed in the necessity of immersion. By the early part of the nineteenth century, these two groups had formed a substantial segment of the population of Philadelphia County in Pennsylvania.<sup>11</sup>

These farmers from the old country recognized the fertility of the surrounding country, and their enthusiasm in letters to those in the "old country," plus the enticement of new emigrants by agents abroad, soon transformed eastern Pennsylvania into a "New Germany," somewhat to the alarm of the established population. To counteract this state of affairs, it was ordered in council held September 17, 1717,

. . . that all emigrants must appear within one month before some magistrate and take such oaths (or give assurances) of their being affected to his Majesty and his government.<sup>12</sup>

Ten years later when Patrick Gordon was governor, the council in Philadelphia ordered that because of the danger of

such Numbers of Strangers daily poured in, who being ignorant of our language & laws, and settling in a body together, make, as it were, a distinct people from his Majesties [*sic.*] Subjects,

The Board taking the same into serious consideration, observe that as these people pretended at first that they fly hither on the Score of their religious Liberties, and come under the Protection of his Majesty, it is requisite that in the first place they should take the Oath of Allegiance, or some equivalent to it to his Majesty, and promise Fidelity to the Proprietor and obedience to our Established Constitution. . . .<sup>13</sup>

This form was prepared for the emigrants to sign:

We Subscribers, Natives and later Inhabitants of the Palatine upon the Rhine and Places adjacent, having transported ourselves and Families into this Province of Pennsylvania, a Colony subject to the Crown of Great Britain, in hopes and Expectations of finding Retreat & peaceable settlement therein, do solemnly promise and engage, that we will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to his present Majesty King George the Second, and his Successors Kings of Great Britain, and will be faithful to the Proprietors of this Province; and that we will demean ourselves peaceably to all his said Majesties [*sic.*] Subjects, and strictly observe and conform to the Laws of England and of this Province, to the utmost of our power and best of our understanding.<sup>14</sup>

Among those whose names appear are many who were Dunkers or German Baptist Brethren. A number who had been baptized in Europe gathered to form a community of their own. Seventeen persons thus gathered, asked Peter Becker to be their leader in the absence of any of the Elders from the homeland. He consented, and six more were baptized that day, December 15, 1723, which marks the formal beginning of the church in America. It is recorded that the day was cold, but the baptism was performed out of doors by immersion, and, indeed, it was a triune baptism. No easy religion this.

An interesting phase of the church and its doctrine was reflected by the remainder of that day's service. After the baptism, and after securing dry clothing, a love feast was held. The newly chosen presiding elders washed feet<sup>15</sup> as a sign of humility; a full feast was prepared and eaten in silence, following which the sacrament was administered.

Because of the great demands that settling a new country made upon time and energy, one of the resultant advantages of the move to the New World was that the disputations and speculations that spoiled the harmony of the Brethren in Europe faded into the background. But when winter

came upon them and the work of the field was done, the fever of religious excitement returned. Politics held little interest for the German settlers in a land and time when Benjamin Franklin spoke of them in the vernacular as "Dutch."

All that was left was religion. The question of the Sabbath Day raised the issue of literal observance of all scriptural commandments; the distinction between clean and unclean foods made things particularly difficult since salt pork was the mainstay of the pioneer frontiersman of that day. The goose found itself in the middle of a great theological debate, in spite of, or in ignorance of, its great service in an earlier day. The reference in Leviticus<sup>16</sup> was taken to include the goose, and this put many a thrifty hausfrau in a difficult situation. The goose was a most useful creature. Its feathers were in great demand to soften the hardships of that early day. Its eggs were prized. Goosegrease made easier many of the difficulties of a mechanic, and even its medicinal qualities were not ignored. Last, and not least, the goose was edible.

One Conrad Beissal<sup>17</sup> arrived on this scene from the Port of Boston, expecting to join Kelpius and the Woman of the Wilderness group in their wait for the Advent, but these people had exhausted themselves with nightly vigils from high towers, and their community had collapsed. Beissal, now at the age of 25, was to add much fuel to the fire before his career ended. He was born in 1691, two months after his dissolute father's death, and reared by his destitute mother, who died when he was eight years of age. He grew up in abject poverty, and led a free and easy life as he accompanied his baker-master to dances where both played the fiddle. In his wanderings he gathered the best and the worst of the occult philosophy of the mystics and Cabalists of the Middle Ages, as well as the severely Sabbatarian worship and tenets of the Brethren, for he had met Peter Becker in Schwarzenau.

He had joined Peter Becker in Germantown, near Philadelphia, and served as a weaver's apprentice. Brethren historians do not speak kindly of Beissal at this date, or any other, for that matter. Some deny that he was ever a member of the church, or insist that he left the group soon after.<sup>18</sup> Some cast doubt on the efficacy of his baptism. It is clear that he was a stiff-willed and proud character, and having a quick mind and a learned background he could confuse many good people.

Beissal was chosen leader of the Brethren group at Conestoga and began at once to make innovations in the services, grafting onto the simple worship certain mystic dogmas which he picked up or invented. Quarreling followed, and finally Beissal and his followers withdrew to isolation in Cocalico. In this secluded valley in the primitive forest on the banks of the Cocalico River, they successfully established, for a time, a mystical community under the name of *Ein Orden Der Eissamen* whose chief aim

was to attain spiritual and physical regeneration and purification. The Ephrata Community, as it was otherwise known, is now defunct, but its buildings are the site of a state park under a program of restoration as a monument to a unique phase of religious history in Pennsylvania.

Let us examine in some detail this colony, for a portion of its doings are of particular interest to Latter-day Saints. The principles of the group—the denunciation of marriage, and the general ascetic regimen—required a cloister system, and monasteries were built. The group, thus well isolated from the general stream of the Brethren group and indeed isolated by doctrine as well as geography, obtained a printing press in the Pennsylvania colony, the first with a font of German type. But even before the press was obtained, a number of pamphlets and books were published, Benjamin Franklin having been commissioned to print some of them.<sup>19</sup>

At this same stage and time, Alexander Mack arrived, as well as the widow Eckerling with her youngest son. These were the people who met in 1708 in Germany to organize the Church. The settlement site, known now as Cocalico, was the Indian-named and Indian-avoided “Den of Serpents” called Hock-Halekung, which, corrupted, became Cocalico. Some attribute a sense of justice to the name of the site. Fighting broke out between English and German settlers; the quarrel over the Sabbath Day, the strange beards and dress of the colonists fanned the fires of suspicion. Rumors of Mexican Jesuits or Jewish authority were circulated. Finally, a large fire was set which swept across the fields toward the colony. Just before it reached the homes of this group, the wind shifted, and the fire is reported to have roared down upon and consumed the homes of those who set it. This was taken, of course, as a sign by the faithful.

Rosicrucian doctrines were drawn upon to keep the people’s spirits aroused. Cereal grains were eschewed for acorns. Eichel-brod replaced pumpernickel and acorns were used to make coffee, schnapps, and tonics.

Perhaps to find something that would consume excess energy and reduce any possibility of a challenge to his authority, Beissal copied Kelpius’ exhausting practice, and this group, too, began to watch for the Grand Judge. Towers were built, and at first a four-hour watch after midnight was established. This was too much, and soon the schedule called for only a two-hour watch and meeting at midnight each night.

Rites claimed to be derived from the Egyptian Cult of Mystic Freemasonry were established, all with the aim that the brotherhood should obtain physical and moral regeneration. Beissal adopted the title of “Vater,” which proved to be a stumbling block to many, particularly as they reviewed the scriptural reference (Matthew 23:8) from which they drew their name. It took Beissal three years to settle this dispute. Soon a tonsure was adopted, and shaven crowns appeared in public. The ire of the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians was thoroughly aroused, and fears of a Jesuit revival grew.

Even in Germantown it was assumed that this group was governed by popish emissaries.

The group continued in these circumstances, their buildings serving as hospitals and their members as nurses during the Revolutionary War. Typhus broke out and took the lives of many who had volunteered to dress the wounds of the injured. Saints and soldiers were buried side by side in the community burying ground.

Finally, the introduction of orthodox churches into the area deprived the community at Cocalico, the Ephrata Community, of its source of converts and new blood, and so only the most ancient waited on, to die. And the community died with them.<sup>20</sup>

Thus far we have omitted reference to one of the group's most interesting excursions into the scriptures for doctrinal practices. Apparently Beissal, for all his genius at inventing things, did not usurp the field. It is reported by some scholars who have examined the history of this group<sup>21</sup> that Emanuel Eckerling, one of the leaders and one-time friend of Beissal, convinced Alexander Mack that the latter's father, the patriarch at whose home the original group had met and who was a member of the original eight members baptized in 1708, had never been properly baptized. These two, Eckerling and Mack, presented themselves to Beissal and asked that they be allowed to be baptized for their deceased relatives.

Once the proposal was accepted, the community spared no effort to make the ceremony an impressive one.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in 1738, a procession was formed on the set date; men, women, and those families who had not accepted the celibacy features of the group were all present. The column of worthies wandered down from their homes on the hill, passing the various buildings that sheltered the colony and across an open meadow to a pool which the river had formed in its wanderings. Special hymns were sung and invocations offered.

Conrad Beissal was the administrator. The first subject, Emanuel Eckerling, presented himself to be immersed for his deceased mother. Alexander Mack, the younger, presented himself for baptism on behalf of his deceased father.<sup>23</sup> The idea of thus securing blessings for deceased or absent kinfolk and friends struck popular fancy, and the custom obtained a firm foothold and was practiced for a number of years thereafter.

But its foothold was a limited one, and so far as can be determined, never spread beyond the Cocalico. The practice of baptism for the dead did indeed flourish long before Elijah formally opened the work for the dead in 1836, but there is room for doubt that the experiment was the result of the work of Elijah. There is no evidence, either, that Joseph Smith ever heard of the Ephrata Community and its experiments. The magnitude of the concept supporting the practice of baptism for the dead in the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints far exceeds anything suggested by study of the group at Cocalico. And of course, Mrs. Brodie didn't state that Joseph Smith copied their practice; she just implied it. Upon the evidence available, it seems to this writer that those who will explain away the story told by Joseph Smith<sup>24</sup> must find some other point of departure for their exercises; no German sect in Pennsylvania will do.<sup>25</sup>

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1. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946.)

2. *Ibid.*, 279. A discussion of the relationships of Freemasonry and Mormonism is beyond this work. Perhaps enough has already been said. For one side, see S. H. Goodwin, *Mormonism and Masonry* (Salt Lake City: 5th printing, 1925), whom Brodie lists in her bibliography. She does not bother to cite A. W. Ivins, *The Relationship of "Mormonism" and Freemasonry* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1934) nor E. C. McGavin, *Mormonism and Masonry* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, Enlarged Edition, 1947), or anyone else who describes the other side of the story.

3. *Ibid.*, 279–282.

4. *Ibid.*, 282. The reference to Paul may be ambiguous to Mrs. Brodie, but it seems clear enough to others. J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910) in reference to I Cor. 15: 29 says, "It is impossible that . . . (it) . . . can refer to anything but vicarious baptism." II, 383; Ronald Knox—, *The New Testament, A New Translation* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953, with imprimatur: Francis J. Spellman, Archbishop, New York) says in a footnote to the same reference, that it is ". . . an allusion to the practice of vicarious baptism on behalf of those who died. . . ." 370.

5. That is to say the only group aside from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Discussion of L.D.S. practice can be found in J. E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912) 71, 89, ff.

6. And this writer acknowledges that he drew much from the following writers, for the general narrative of the history of the Brethren: R. D. Bowman, *Church of the Brethren and War* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Publishing House, 1957); F. E. Mallott, *Studies in Brethren History* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Publishing House, 1954); and J. E. Miller, *The Story of Our Church* (Revised & Enlarged Ed.) (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Publishing House, 1957).

7. T. M. Lindsay, *History of the Reformation* (2d. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910).

8. Cornelius Krahn, "Menno Simons," *Mennonite Encyclopedia, The*, ed. H. S. Bender and C. H. Smith, Vol. III (1947); J. Horsch, *Menno Simons, His Life, Labor and Teachings* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1916.)

9. Cf. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1908), I, 40 ff.

10. J. F. Sachse, *The German Pietists of Pennsylvania 1664–1708* (Philadelphia: Printed by the author, 1895).

11. *Ibid.*; and the same author's *The German Sectarians of Pennsylvania 1708–1742*, 2 vols., (Philadelphia: Printed by the author, 1899–1900).

12. *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: J. Steverns & Co., 1853) (being a reprint of the same title, first published, Harrisburg: T. Fenn & Co., 1851), III, 29.

13. *Ibid.*, III, 282 f.

14. *Ibid.* The result of this order and its enforcement provides for genealogical researchers today the names of many thousands of emigrants and some notes as to family organization, occupation, and town of last residence. See I. D. Rupp, *A Collection of Upwards of Thirty Thousand Names of German, Swiss, Dutch, French and Other Immigrants to Pennsylvania from 1727–1776, etc.* (Philadelphia: Leary Stuart & Co., 1856) and R. B. Strassberger, *Pennsylvania German Pioneers, a publication of the original lists of arrivals in the Port of Philadelphia from 1727 to 1818*, 3 vols. (Norristown, Penna: German Society, 1934).

15. Not unknown in Mormon history, either. See *History of the Church, etc.*, 11:13, 18.

16. “And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: . . . the swan . . .” Lev. 11:13, 18.

17. W. Klein, *Johann Conrad Beissal* (Philadelphia: University of Penna. Press, 1942).

18. “It is important to mention . . . (Conrad Beissal and his Ephrata Society) because the Ephrata Society has been so often mistaken for the Church of the Brethren in early Pennsylvania history . . .” R. D. Bowman, *op. cit.*, 69.

19. *Mystische und sehr gehevma Spruchee, etc.* (Philadelphia: Gedruck bey B. Franklin in Sahr, 1730).

20. As noted this particular group of Dunkers passed from the scene, but it should be noted also that the Brethren have not suffered the same fate and are still an active and practicing group of Christians. Five main branches survive: The Church of the Brethren, a conservative mid-stream group; the Old German Baptist Brethren, formed in 1881, and adhering more strictly to the principles of nonconformity to the world; the Brethren Church (Progressive) formed in 1882 and less strict than the two aforementioned in matters of dress and wearing of hair and beard; the Seventh-day German Baptists, formed in 1728 who observe the seventh day as the Sabbath and who live a communal and ascetic life; and, finally the Church of God (New Dunkers) organized in 1848 who “use Bible names for Bible things.”

21. J. F. Sachse, *The German Sectarians, etc.*, I, 363, 366.

22. Cf. *History of the Church, etc.*, IV, 568–69.

23. The records of the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints indicate that Alexander Mack, Sr. (1679–1735), again had a vicarious baptism performed on his behalf, January 19, 1946.

Alexander Mack was no relation to the Macks of Lucy Mack Smith. Her family was Scotch. For their genealogy, see Anderson, Mary Audentia Smith, *Ancestry and Posterity of Joseph Smith and Emma Hale, etc.* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing Co., 1929).

24. *History of the Church, etc.*, IV, 424–25, 568–69; V, 141, 142 ff. See also *The Doctrine and Covenants, etc.*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Published under various titles and in various places beginning in 1833) 1876), Sections 124, 128.

25. Of course, the real mystery of the Kingdom is not the alleged hidden origins of doctrines and plagiarisms of practices of others by Joseph Smith, but the confusions and contradictions which the authors of the three-score-and-more exposés of Joseph Smith have created and brought to print in trying to avoid the otherwise inevitable consequences of his tale.