

MATHIAS AND BENGTA

On January 12, 1826 - only three or four miles from the moats of Kristianstad - a baby girl was born to the newlyweds OLA JONSSON and PERNILLA SVENSDOTTER. Three days later, OLA, the proud father, took his infant daughter to the parish church in Viby for her christening into the Swedish Lutheran church.

Family members had come from neighboring farms and parishes to witness the event and to congratulate the new parents. The infant's paternal grandmother, HANNA OLSDOTTER, had received a special invitation - to hold her newborn granddaughter during the ceremony - the honor reserved for the godmother (the woman responsible for raising the child in the Christian faith should something happen to the parents).

That day in the Viby parish church, HANNA OLSDOTTER likely smiled proudly as the granddaughter she held was christened 'BENGTA'. (Because BENGTA's father was named OLA, she would be known as BENGTA OLS-DOTTER.) As it so happened, BENGTA's grandmother would be called upon to fulfill her responsibility as godmother thirteen years later.

Two and a half years later, on June 11, 1828, a boy was born to another couple - NILS OLSSON and ELNA NILSDOTTER - in the neighboring parish of Rinkaby. Four days later, their infant son, the fourth child of seven, was taken to their parish church to be christened 'MATTIS', and was known as MATHIAS NILSSON. On the ceiling of the Rinkaby church are paintings which depict the everyday labors of the common farmer. Only four days old, as he lay face up in PERNILLA's arms, MATHIAS looked squarely and unflinchingly at his future of toil and hard work.

MATHIAS was likely named after his great-grandfather, while both shared their name with one who history remembers more often. Almost eighteen centuries earlier, a young fisherman stood up in a group of about one hundred and twenty of his closest friends and said:

"Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake concerning Judas....

Wherefore of these men which have been companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us. Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

And they appointed two, Joseph...and Mathias. And they prayed, and said, Thou Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, that he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which by transgression fell.

And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Mathias; and he was numbered with the twelve apostles." (Acts 1:14-26)

The memory of MATHIAS' own namesake, a vibrant testimony of apostolic succession, could very well have been a key factor in his later acceptance of the message of living apostles.

MATHIAS AND BENGTA'S YOUTH

Across the Atlantic, important events were happening which would come to have great meaning for MATHIAS and BENGTA. In the same month that MATHIAS was born, an obscure farmer named Joseph Smith completed the translation of the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon. Within two years, the fledgling Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was officially organized in New York State. It would take another twenty years for that message to reach Scandinavia.

Important events were also taking place in Scandinavia. A rapidly growing group of Danes, Norwegians and Swedes desired that the Scandinavian kingdoms might once again be joined together in some form of union. In 1829, a famous Danish poet was invited to visit Swedish Scania - and was crowned with honors. His counterparts in Scania greeted their Danish neighbor with the acclamation:

“The age of separation is past
nor should it ever have been
In the boundless
free world of the Spirit”
(Derry, 239).

(The people of Scania obviously had not forgotten their historical ties to Denmark, which may explain why MATHIAS and BENGTA's eventual return to the kingdom of their fathers.)

While the Danish poet was being honored a few miles away in Lund, BENGTA and her parents moved a few miles northwest of her birthplace in Onnestad parish.

In 1832, three years after their arrival in Onnestad, a boy named HANS MATTSON was born to another family within that parish. The events which HANS later recorded give us a glimpse into the things that were likely of importance for young MATHIAS and BENGTA.

When MATHIAS and BENGTA were ten and twelve years old, Bertel Thorvaldsen, a world-famous sculptor returned to Scandinavia amidst great fanfare. In his day, he was considered by many to be the greatest sculptor in all of Europe. For the previous forty years, Thorvaldsen had been in Rome carving the larger-than-life stone figures which earned him a hero's welcome in Copenhagen.

There in the Danish capital, during the last seven years of his life, Thorvaldsen carved what many consider to be his most memorable work - each of the twelve apostles, and the capstone of that work, the Kristus. Unlike most statues of Christ, Thorvaldsen did not depict the Savior suffering on the cross, but instead chose the theme of the triumphant resurrected Christ standing with arms outstretched. (A copy of his Kristus stands today in Salt Lake City in the Temple Square visitors' center.)

In 1839, thirteen-year-old BENGTA moved to the village of Horna in Ahus parish to live with the grandmother who had promised to raise her in the faith.; Meanwhile, the movement towards a Scandinavian union gained momentum. One year after BENGTA's move to Horna, famed Danish scientist H. C. Orsted addressed a scientific congress of Scandinavians:

“A misconceived national pride has divided us and brought foreigners to consider our achievements of little significance....Let six million Scandinavians place their entire weight in one scale, and surely it shall not be found too light” (Derry, 239).

According to B. WHEELER's account, BENGTA became blind at the age of seventeen (ca. 1843) which would be while she was living with her grandparents in Ahus parish. B. WHEELER explained that grandma BENGTA could “only tell daylight from dark nights”. At about this same time, HANS MATTSON, BENGTA's former neighbor, wrote of an important event in his childhood which may have also involved BENGTA and/or MATHIAS:

“Once my parents took me along to see the king, who was to pass by on the highway a short distance from our home. The people from the country around had congregated by thousands to see his majesty.

Most of them, however, did not get a chance to see anything but a large number of carriages, each of which was drawn by four or six horses, and postilions and servants in splendid liveries. In the midst of this confusion I, however, succeeded in catching a glimpse of King Oscar I [1844-1859] as he passed by.

In my childish mind, I had fancied that the king and his family and all others in authority were the peculiar and elect people of the Almighty, but after this event, which produced a very decided impression on me, I began to entertain serious doubts as to the correctness of my views on this matter” (Mattson, 9).

HANS also recorded a memorable meeting in Kristianstad County which may have had a great deal to do with the later actions of MATHIAS and BENGTA:

“At another time, I went with my mother to the city of Kristianstad to hear the Reverend Doctor P. Fjellstedt, who had just returned from a missionary tour in India”: (Mattson, 9).

HANS was deeply impressed by Reverend FJELLSTEDT's eloquence and the tales of missionary exploits in foreign countries. Reverend FJELLSTEDT's lectures were quite popular, and in 1846, he founded in Scania the first missionary college in Sweden (Derry, 300, 436). Whether MATHIAS and BENGTA attended the Reverend's discussions is unknown, but his efforts and tales were well known in the district, and likely prepared the way for MATHIAS and BENGTA to later welcome the visit of missionaries from America.

At about the same time, across the Atlantic the brothers Joseph and Hyrum Smith were slain in a small jail by a vigilante mob, an action which they were sure would destroy the progress of the growing church. Three years later, the first wagon train of church refugees arrived in Salt Lake valley, from where some would soon leave for Europe.

A year after their arrival in Utah, war broke out in Denmark. German-speaking residents of Slesvig and Holstein, two loosely-held Danish duchies, resented Danish attempts to make the duchies a permanent part of Denmark. (Historically, the lands the duchies covered had originally been Danish, but through the centuries had experienced a great influx of Germans.) Although many in the Duchies actually favored Danish annexation, the German-speaking faction was the majority, and appealed to Prussia to intervene. As Prussian troops advanced northward, Danes rushed to defend their southern border - joined by Norwegians and Swedes - especially from former-Danish Scania. Once again, Danes stood at the Danevirke, where their Viking forbears had stood a millennium earlier.

HANS MATTSON recorded a glimpse of how these events effected Kristianstad county:

“The first Danish-German war broke out about this time, and I, with many other youths felt a hearty sympathy for the Danes. The Swedish government resolved to send troops to help their neighbors, and a few regiments marching through our city [Kristianstad] fanned our youthful enthusiasm into flame.

Finally, a detachment of the artillery, quartered in the city was ordered to leave for the seat of war, and now I could no longer restrain myself, but besieged my parents to let me join that part of the army which was going to the battlefield, and to clinch the argument, I was cruel enough to send word to my distressed mother that if she would not consent, I would run away from home and join the army anyway.

This last argument made her yield, and in the fall of 1849, I became an artillery cadet, being then in my seventeenth year...[However,] the war was virtually closed before our troops arrived at the place of destination...” (Mattson, 11-12).

An English eyewitness described the excitement in Copenhagen over the approach of Swedish troops:

“The station was filled with a crowd of men and women in the greatest state of excitement. They had assembled to see our train depart, and all who took tickets for Korsor [the gateway to the battlefront] became incidentally popular favorites. Rough hands were thrust in at the windows, to give every one a parting shake. Hearty rounds of cheers mingled with patriotic songs; and to raise the public enthusiasm even higher, a body of Swedish volunteers arrived upon the platform. At last a bell rang, and off we rolled, in the midst of a thousand farewells from those who remained behind” (Skinner, 18-19).

It is quite possible that MATHIAS was among the fifteen thousand Swedish troops committed to help defend Denmark. One third of them were actually deployed in Denmark and the rest were “held in readiness in Scania” (Derry, 239). MATHIAS was at this time in his early twenties, and there is good reason to suspect he had some involvement in this first Danish war.

In 1850, the first missionaries from the newly-settled Salt Lake Valley arrived in war-torn Denmark, led by Apostle Erastus Snow. One month after their arrival, the Danes were victorious in the fateful Battle of Isted, which has been called “the bloodiest battle that had ever been fought on Danish ground” (Derry, 240).

However, the Prussians had won most of the war, and unabashedly demanded dismemberment of the Danish kingdom. But Denmark's allies stepped in to negotiate a more favorable end to the conflict. A few months later, an uneasy treaty was concluded.

There is great truth in the statement "in every adversity lies the seed of an equal or greater benefit." This tragic case of warfare is such an example. Personal and national crises tend to remind man of his spiritual needs, just as war reminds us of our mortality. In this manner, the carnage and uncertainty sweeping the nation served to soften many of the Danes towards the message of the arriving missionaries.

"But behold, because of the exceedingly great length of the war between the Nephites and the Lamanites many had become hardened, because of the exceedingly great length of the war; and many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility." Alma 62:41

Just as the same boiling water which hardens eggs also softens carrots, likewise, individuals react differently to identical challenges.

One month after the battle of Isted, the new missionaries performed the first baptisms in Denmark, just outside the ramparts of Copenhagen. That week, Apostle Erastus Snow wrote back to the First Presidency of the Church, "As far as my experience and observation extend, the Danes are a kind, hospitable people, especially the middle and lower classes; and a higher tone of morality pervades them than exists in the corresponding classes in England and America; and, if I mistake not my feelings, the Lord has many people among them" (Jenson, 8). His feelings were not mistaken.