

ESTONIAN WEST COAST REVIVAL IN RETROSPECT: THE BIBLE AS A TOOL FOR INTERPRETING CHANGE*

ПРОБУДЖЕННЯ НА ЗАХІДНОМУ УЗБЕРЕЖЖІ ЕСТОНІЇ В РЕТРОСПЕКТИВІ: БІБЛІЯ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ІНТЕРПРЕТАЦІЇ ПЕРЕМІНИ

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"Богословские размышления" № 24, 2020: 167-180

DOI: 10.29357/2521-179X.2020.24.10

Abstract: The West Coast Revival in Estonia, in the 1870s and 1880s, emphasised conversion, ethical lifestyle and a joyful, experiential discipleship. This was a new, congregational paradigm that emerged in this movement, in the westernmost areas of Tsarist Russia. The Revival was deeply rooted in a fresh reading of the Bible, even if its adherents

Анотація: Пробудження на західному узбережжі Естонії в 1870-ті та 1880-ті наголошувало на навернення, етичний спосіб життя та радісне, практичне учнівство. Це була нова, конгрегаційна парадигма, що виникла в цьому русі на найбільш західних теренах царистської Росії. Пробудження було вкорінене у свіжому прочитанні Біблії, не дивлячись на

* Стаття постуила в редакцію 02.03.2020; утверждена в печать 11.04.2020.

used simple and literal interpretation. Both the Moravian tradition and Swedish neopietism encouraged individual and collective hermeneutics. The Revival, being inspired by both, however, made conclusions that reached further: these awakened farmers separated from the Lutheran church, began to conduct baptism and communion independently, and discussed biblical passages between themselves in order to find guidance in the midst of religious changes. As a result, Revivalist free churches and Baptist churches were established in Estonia. The authority of the biblical texts, on which the revivalist believers built their convictions, according to their best understanding, offered new self-confidence. Indirectly, this contributed to a strengthening of national self-awareness. The article argues that there were at least three areas where biblical interpretation helped to find guidance and convictional courage. Firstly, the Bible was used to motivate and explain independent worship, separate ecclesial patterns and maintaining a distance from the existing mainline churches, Lutheran or Orthodox. Secondly, scriptural language and images functioned both to justify and balance emotional phenomena which were characteristic of the Revival. And thirdly, biblical examples helped to interpret persecution and suffering that the revivalist believers met both from the traditional churches and from Tsarist Russian officials.

Keywords: West Coast Revival in Estonia, biblical interpretation, religious change, separation from traditional churches, enthusiasm, persecution.

те, що його послідовники використовували просту та буквальну герменевтику. Однак моравська традиція та шведський ново-пієтизм заохочували індивідуальну та колективну герменевтику. Пробудження було натхнене обома рухами призвело до висновків, що сягали далі: ці оновлені фермери відділившись від лютеранської церкви почали проводити хрещення та причастя незалежно а також обговорювали між собою біблійні уривки, щоб знайти керівництво серед релігійних змін. В результаті в Естонії були засновані вільні церкви пробудження та баптистські церкви. Авторитет біблійних текстів, на яких віруючі будували свої переконання, як вони вважали, надавав нову впевненість. Опосередковано це приводило до посилення національної самосвідомості. Ця стаття доводить, що існувало не менше трьох сфер, в яких біблійна інтерпретація допомогла віднайти керівництво та мужність переконання. По-перше, Біблія використовувалась для мотивації та пояснення незалежного поклоніння, окремих церковних моделей та збереження дистанції з існуючими традиційними церквами, лютеранською чи православною. По-друге, духовна мова та образи функціонували для виправдання та збалансування емоційних феноменів, які були характерними для пробудження. По-третє, біблійні приклади допомагали інтерпретувати переслідування та страждання, яких пробуджені віруючі зазнавали від традиційних церков та від царських чиновників.

Ключові слова: пробудження на західному узбережжі в Естонії, біблійна інтерпретація, релігійна переміна, відділення від традиційних церков, ентузіазм, переслідування.

The Bible is for free church believers a central key for guidance in Christian life and belief. In personal life, in transitions and crises the Bible is a source of stability and wisdom. "In Christ and in community, the Bible will continue to guide us in the journey of faith," Alan Culpepper states.¹ However, the way in which the Bible has been read and applied in

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, "Scripture," in R. Wayne Stacy, ed., *A Baptist's Theology* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1999), p. 98.

practice is broader than personal appreciation of scriptures. Biblical narratives, teachings and images have been used to understand change in the midst of ecclesial developments and during revival times. The use of the Bible as a tool for interpreting transformation has been influenced by wider contexts, and scriptural language has shaped the congregational identity and behaviour of evangelical believers.

This paper takes a closer look at the role of the Bible among a special group of Estonian evangelicals – revivalist believers at the end of the nineteenth century. This was a time of a major religious movement, called the West Coast Revival, in Estonia. I will analyse how the adherents of the Revival used the Bible to explain and understand the change in their ecclesiology and practice. I will argue that there was an increased interest in biblical texts among revivalist believers and a fresh belief in the authority of scriptures, even if interpreted in a simple and literal way, often in contrast to the local Lutheran pastor’s authority. The Old and New Testament stories – and sometimes isolated scripture verses – helped to strengthen the revivalist believers’ identity.

The Estonian West Coast Revival, in the westernmost part of Tsarist Russia, in the 1870s and 1880s, was characterised by personal initiative and newly found enthusiasm of believers, with a focus on conversion and ethical lifestyle. As is the case in every new religious movement, the Estonian revivalist believers had to become better aware of who they were, and how they differed from Lutheran and Orthodox traditions, which were both established in the Western region of Estonia. In short, these believers – many of them farmers with modest education – faced the challenges of clarifying the aspects of their religious identity. They took responsibility for their religious decisions and were involved in apologetical arguments with their critics. As already mentioned, a simple interpretation of the biblical message was an important tool. In the long run, this process helped to increase the self-confidence of local Estonian believers and played – at least indirectly – a part in building national identity, in the context of Russian and German speaking culture.²

It should be clarified that there are not many written documents of the revivalist believers themselves from the time the Revival took place. This is why the title of this paper includes the word “retrospect”. The evidence about the interpretative function of the Bible comes mainly from the Baptist and Revivalist free church sources which were written forty or fifty years later. However, the contemporaries of the West Coast Revival were still members and leaders of the churches which were “planted” and took root during the revivalist movement, and the language of passing on the narrative of the “wave of revival” was carrying the identity and images which were born within the events. Certainly, these sources, written, for example in the 1920s, reflect how the Bible was used to understand the Revival situation for the ongoing free church tradition. Nevertheless, I would argue that the way it was presented for the next generation also

² For a general survey of the West Coast Revival, see: Toivo Pilli, “The West Coast Revival in Estonia, 1873-1884: Paving the Way for Baptist Mission”, *Baptistic Theologies*, no 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 1-17. I have used some background material from this article in the present paper.

mirrored the logic, images and the use of biblical language that proved helpful already in the nineteenth century for the first generation of these “new believers”, or “religious rioters”, as they were called by their fellow countrymen.³

The Bible and the West Coast Revival

The West Coast Revival in Estonia – then part of the Baltic Province of Tsarist Russia – began in the 1870s, first among the Swedish speaking population, and spreading later among Estonian speaking people. During the first decade of this rather spontaneous movement and later, taking the form of Revivalist free church or Baptist communities, it sharply increased religious enthusiasm, differing from Lutheran ecclesial patterns. The first Revivalist churches emerged from 1882 in Ridala and Lihula parishes, and the first Baptist church was established in 1884 in the seaside town of Haapsalu.⁴ These churches introduced the predominantly Lutheran culture to a new ecclesial paradigm: the congregational way of being church.

The Revival was inevitably linked with the new approach to the reading of the Bible. Actually, the whole movement began with an illuminating awareness. Simple farmers and ordinary church members reached the conclusion that they were able, and indeed, they had a spiritual responsibility to read and interpret the Bible – not only for personal piety, but also for organising church life! It was not enough to know Bible verses or key stories for passing confirmation class. Biblical knowledge was now a matter of inner transformation, which was reflected in changed lifestyle and, as it turned out, also a changed view of being and doing church.

Since the Reformation, as is widely known, Protestant spirituality placed biblical texts and the catechism in the centre as part of basic education – both in school and in the church. At the same time, despite individual reading at home, the whole process was clearly guided by the institutional church, represented by the parish minister. However, the new revivalist practices encouraged farmers, artisans and some schoolteachers to take the initiative in reading and finding the meaning of scriptural texts, without the supervision of a local pastor, who often was a German speaking cleric. There were signs of communal hermeneutics – revivalist believers discussing key texts, such as those dealing with the issue of baptism or justifying joyful enthusiastic spirituality. They emphasised that baptism is “the pledge of a good conscience towards God” (1 Peter 3:21) and the Kingdom of God includes “joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).⁵

The Moravian movement, a branch of Pietism, which formed a background to the West Coast Revival, found its way to Estonia in the eighteenth century, and gained new strength in the nineteenth century. This movement considerably increased the interest in the scriptures in the local language – Estonian. The first full Bible in Estonian was published,

³ Jaanus Plaat, *Usuliikumised, kirikud ja vabakogudused Lääne- ja Hiiumaal* [Religious Movements, Churches and Free Churches in West-Estonia and Hiiumaa Island] (Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 2001), p. 72.

⁴ Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel* [50 Years in the Footsteps of the Apostles] (Keila: E.B.K. Kirjastus, 1934), p. 27.

⁵ Mihkel Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu* [A History of the Revival in Ridala] (Keila: K.-Ü. “Külvaja” trükk, 1928), pp. 24, 30-31.

with the moral and financial help of Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf, in 1739, and this both raised the level of literacy and shaped the development of the Estonian language.⁶ The full Bible in Estonian opened new horizons for local people who were not German, Swedish or Russian speakers but who spoke and – with the help of the parish school system – learned to read Estonian. Reading the Bible (the history of the people of Israel; deeply meaningful stories of families and relationships between brothers and parents – narratives of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph; the poetry of Song of Songs; and New Testament stories of Jesus) must have been an eye-opening experience.

One aspect of the Moravian spirituality was linking the biblical language and world with everyday life and behaviour. Ilmar Talve, an Estonian cultural historian, has said that the Moravian movement “brought forward, from among common people, the persons who were able to write and read ... and who could practice their organisational leadership skills in the work of the congregation”.⁷ In Moravian meetings the farmers themselves had a chance to preach and exhort those present. The inspiration from the Bible and the need to interpret its message was an important aspect of strengthening the self-confidence of the local population. From Moravian meetings the Bible, a hymnbook and a sermon collection found their way to farmers’ homes – to be read at least on Sundays. By the mid-nineteenth century there were about 70,000 Moravians in Estonia and Livonia; about ten per cent of the whole population.⁸ They gathered in approximately 250 societies.⁹

The West Coast Revival built on this tradition, but was committed to taking it further, reaching consequences, especially in ecclesiology, that Moravians felt uneasy about – such as separation from the established church, or abandoning infant baptism, or developing a lifestyle without consumption of alcohol. The latter was probably also influenced by the spread of temperance societies during the nineteenth century, but it harmonised well with attempts to establish some clear signs of radical discipleship. The new enthusiasm of learning from the Bible clearly began to shape both individual everyday practices and collective religious practices of the adherents of the Revival.

A telling example comes from Mihkel Busch, from Ridala parish, who wrote about the Revival, probably referring to the late 1870s. A group of men from Haapsalu went to the nearby Võrmsi Island, inhabited by Estonian Swedes, to collect timber. Võrmsi Island was one of the centres of the enthusiastic West Coast Revival. On their way the men lost a rope. “When they returned a fortnight later, they found the rope hanging on the top of a fence by the road. News spread on the mainland: those Swedes have become so holy now, there are no men on the island who would have taken the rope, and there is not a drop of vodka anywhere! One could die of thirst!”¹⁰ The revivalist movement was having a transformative effect on both beliefs and practices of these “new believers” in Võrmsi Island. The seventh

⁶ Toomas Paul, *Eesti piiblitõlke ajalugu* [A History of Estonian Bible Translation] (Tallinn: Emakeele Selts, 1999), pp. 429, 437-472.

⁷ Ilmar Talve, *Eesti kultuurilugu* [A History of Estonian Culture] (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2004), p. 229.

⁸ Talve, *Eesti kultuurilugu*, p. 324.

⁹ Olaf Sild and Vello Salo, *Lühike Eesti kirikulugu* [A Short Estonian Church History] (Tartu, 1995), p. 111.

¹⁰ Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 15.

commandment “Thou shalt not steal!” came to be practised with radical commitment, as it had not been done before.

Education as a Means of Spreading Biblical Language

The immediate driving force of the West Coast Revival was the activities of the neo-pietistic Lutheran missionaries from Sweden (especially Lars Johan Österblom and Thure Emanuel Thorén), who worked among the Swedish speaking communities in Western Estonia, in the 1870s and 1880s. Thorén and Österblom offered education which was immersed in the biblical message – preaching, explaining and offering literature. These culturally “Coastal Swedish” areas were the “strongholds” of the new movement in its initial stages, but the Revival soon spread among the Estonian population.

The aim of missionary work was to increase literacy and to make the Bible accessible for the Lutheran population, though, certainly, the project had its effect also on some Orthodox in the region. When Swedish Lutherans discussed if it would be helpful to buy Bibles for their compatriots in Estonia, Lars Erik Mozell, pastor of the Swedish Mihkli (St Michael’s) church in Tallinn, gave this advice: there are enough Bibles, but instead, teachers-missionaries should be sent to help improve literacy.¹¹ Action was taken. And this made a lasting mark on the culture of Estonia by fostering education, ethical lifestyle and diaconal work. It is symbolic that at the “cradle” of the Revival personal access to the biblical message – both reading motivation and skills – was a crucial issue.

Thorén and Österblom’s work is directly related to teaching the Bible, though their missionary tasks developed to become multifaceted, including the provision of health-care advice and promotion of temperance. Thorén, who was a relatively young man when he arrived in Western Estonia, established a teachers’ seminary in Paslepa, in 1873, which trained teachers for primary schools. Altogether about thirty students graduated from Paslepa Seminary between 1873 and 1887.¹² Thorén placed a great emphasis on religious education. Prayer meetings and sermons in the neighbourhood were an inseparable part of his activity. He encouraged his students to read the Swedish neo-pietistic publication *Pietisten*.¹³ In addition, music was used to help memorise and explain the biblical message. Thorén’s arrival in Noarootsi was described as follows: “The local pastor met him with kindness and offered him accommodation in which he stayed for a while. Soon the pastor’s female servants started talking in the village saying that a strange young man had arrived from Sweden, who does not talk much, does not laugh but sings dancing tunes with sacred lyrics.”¹⁴ These merry tunes were revival songs of Swedish origin, which used biblical imagery.

¹¹ H. Tuttar and H. V. Dahl, *Ärkamise aeg* [A Time of Revival] (Tallinn: EBK Selts, 1929), pp. 41-42.

¹² Villem Altoa and Paul Ariste, “Ühest varjuäänud õppeasutisest. Passlepa seminar 1873-1887” [About a Forgotten Educational Institution: Passlepa Teachers’ Seminary 1873-1887], *Eesti Kirjandus*, no. 5 (1936), p. 225.

¹³ Riho Saard, “Baptismi Viron ja Pohjois-Liivinmaan kuvernementeissa, 1865-1920” [The Baptist Movement in the Provinces of Estonia and North-Livonia, 1865-1920], pro gradu thesis (Helsinki University, 1994), p. 19.

¹⁴ Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, pp. 11-12.

The students of Paslepa Seminary, who later worked as schoolteachers, saw an educational and ministerial model, which naturally mixed teaching-learning and revivalist spirituality. People had to become aware of their sinful nature, repent, be revived through the Holy Spirit and the word of God, and experience spiritual new birth.¹⁵ An essential “missionary task” was performed by songs, sermons and probably some literature that was mediated to those interested. The “awakened believers” were aware that there was literature in Russian and German which might help them to understand better the theological questions that they were struggling with.¹⁶ Missionary work was enhanced by the activities of the colporteurs of the Bible Society. Lars Österblom, who worked in Vormsi Island, used innovative methods to teach Bible stories to children – instead of punishment he gave small gifts to children to motivate them to read and learn the Sunday school material.¹⁷

As the Revival began to spread, attempts to interpret the Bible for congregational life among revivalist believers themselves, and to put it all into practice, became a burning issue. The biblical message proved to initiate and motivate action and transformation. If the Bible says the early churches were much less hierarchical than is reality today, what should we do about it? If the Bible says you should listen to God more than to earthly authorities, does it mean our illegal gatherings in farmhouses are justified? If the Bible does not give a clear command to baptise babies, is our infant baptism valid at all and what should we do now? No doubt these questions led to tensions with existing institutional church authorities. The main critique came from Lutheran and Orthodox churches, but also from government officials – especially when the believers organised gatherings without permission.

The Bible, leading the “new believers” to wrestle with its message, was bringing new aspects of faith and practice to the forefront of the Revival movement. It was the simple farmers who began to read and discuss and make conclusions based on their reading. They began to rely on their own insights and communal hermeneutics, instead of listening to guidance from the local Lutheran pastor. These revivalist believers made efforts to practise what they read, thus developing a culture of ethical-pietistic lifestyle. One of the main changes that occurred in the Estonian religious landscape was that a congregational model of church began to take shape. And last but not least – the educational efforts, the Bible study and preaching, and the effect of the Paslepa Seminary, initiated and supported by the Swedish missionaries, helped to spread biblical narrative and imagery, which became part of revivalist self-identity.

On the following pages the use of the Bible and its narrative among the revivalist believers is discussed. Firstly, the courage derived from the Bible, as the revivalist believers understood it, led the movement towards separation from the mainline churches – both Lutheran and Orthodox. Revivalist free churches and Baptist churches were born in Estonia in the 1880s. Secondly, the Bible offered a tool which helped both to justify

¹⁵ Plaat, *Usuliikumised*, p. 63.

¹⁶ Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Tuttar and Dahl, *Ärkamise aeg*, pp. 48-49.

emotions, and to balance emotional excesses, in order to make the movement sustainable. The Bible functioned both as a wind which gave power to the Revival flame, and as a fire extinguisher which helped to keep the fire under control. And thirdly, it helped to interpret the tensions and external oppression, and make it part of identity-narrative. The simple logic said: the early church went through difficulties, and Jesus Christ was misunderstood, so the same happens to committed disciples today.

Separatism Supported by Biblical Interpretation

The spiritual trajectory of the West Coast Revival moved from repentance and religious experience towards attempts to explain, in the light of the Bible, the development of the Revival and to reach decisions by the revivalist believers themselves: from spontaneous experience towards practical decisions. This included an awareness that separation from the Lutheran church was possible and rationally justified. In Livonia and Estonia, there was a mass conversion movement from Lutheranism into Russian Orthodoxy in the nineteenth century,¹⁸ but forming a church with no established structures, with no local tradition, was something unheard of. It was dangerous.

As early as 1877, the followers of the Revival ideas discussed with the missionary Thor n issues of separating from the Lutheran church. His response was diplomatic: “Abroad, there are large crowds of believers, who are separate from the church they do not want to be in, and they have their independent activities, and elect a brother from among themselves who takes a lead in spiritual matters and ordinances. But we do not support this here, we leave it for people to decide.”¹⁹ And how did the people decide? They moved towards separatism. They found courage from dualistic images of the people of God fleeing from Babel, and from Pauline words that a believer has nothing in common with an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6:15-16).²⁰ Personal preferences, disappointment with the formal ecclesial structures, a rise of enthusiasm – all played a role. However, the authority of the Bible was inevitably necessary for such wide-scale changes.

The awakened farmers and former students of Paslepa Seminary attempted to interpret the Bible in a forthright way and to find scriptural justification for the steps they took. In Vormsi Island, partly driven by the resentment against the unpopular local Lutheran pastor Alexander Nordgren, the supporters of the Revival began to arrange their own prayer meetings, Bible readings, funerals and other ordinances.²¹ The missionary Lars Österblom was on their side. Neo-pietistic Christians were well aware of the New Testament warnings against misuse of alcohol (Romans 13:13, Galatians 5:21), and the nineteenth-century temperance movement also had an impact on the change of their convictions. In addition, “the new believers” began to doubt if the spiritual

¹⁸ Toomas Schwak, “Kirikuvahetusliikumine Liivimaal” [Conversion Movement in Livonia] and “Kirikuvahetusliikumine Eestimaal” [Conversion Movement in Estonia], in Riho Altnurme, comp. and ed., *Eesti kiriku- ja religioonilugu* [A History of Church and Religion in Estonia] (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2018), pp. 191-194, 196-197.

¹⁹ Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 27.

²⁰ Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 27.

²¹ Plaat, *Usuliikumised*, p. 85.

ordinances – in the Lutheran language, sacraments – were valid if administered by a pastor who was known for his excessive use of alcohol.²²

In September 1882 in Ridala parish, not far from the Lutheran church building, a separatist Lord's Supper was celebrated by the revivalist believers. From the Lutheran point of view, a separate communion was a severe breaking of church discipline and Ridala pastor Magnus Hörschelmann soon announced that nine persons had left the Lutheran congregation.²³ It is debatable whether these revivalist believers left their mother church or were excommunicated, but the result was clear: a course towards separatism was undeniable. There is also a short description of a baptismal ceremony that took place in the same parish. Mihkel Busch said: "The baptism took place by a stream but after the Lutheran church fashion."²⁴ Most probably the method – at this stage of the Revival – was pouring, not immersion. However, the baptism was a theological statement in practice: the believers had to confess their faith and give witness to their repentance. Baptism was understood as a radical and conscious commitment to Christ (Romans 6: 3–4).²⁵ As the result of inspiration derived from abroad and from their reading of the Bible, independent actions were taken, and the "new believers" were becoming aware of the congregational church model as an alternative way of being a church. Separation became irreversible.

Re-interpretation of baptism and celebrating the Lord's Supper independently, not in the church building and without a Lutheran pastor present, were crucial theological manifestations. The awakened believers did not find justification for infant baptism in the New Testament. It was relying on their reading that motivated them and gave them courage to criticise hierarchical church structure, infant baptism and "worldly behaviour" of Lutheran clergy. The believers were appealing to an authority beyond themselves and beyond institutional church, they were appealing to the scriptures – even if they failed to notice that their own method of biblical reading was sometimes simplistic and literal.

The revival process on the West Coast of Estonia in the last decades of the nineteenth century was a multifaceted popular movement which included simple biblical interpretation and separatist actions, as well as emotional and enthusiastic phenomena.

The Bible as a Balancing Element amidst Heated Enthusiasm

One feature of the West Coast Revival was emotionalism and enthusiasm. The cultural anthropological research has offered a colourful, even if sometimes one-sided, picture of the phenomena. The crowded revival meetings in farmhouses or in the open air resulted in unconventional religious excitement: "Some awakened persons fell on the ground, and remained motionless like dead, when salvation and peace filled their hearts. Others greeted their becoming God's children with jumping in joy and jubilation."²⁶

²² Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 28.

²³ Saard, "Baptismi", p. 23.

²⁴ Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 31.

²⁵ *Eesti Baptisti koguduste ajaloolik Album 25 Juubeli aasta mälestuseks* [In Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary: A Historical Album of Estonian Baptist Churches] (Tallinn, 1911), p. 52, see also p. 63.

²⁶ Plaat, *Usuliikumised*, p. 69.

There were also other phenomena: speaking in tongues (glossolalia), visions, prophecies and apocalyptic expectations. Sometimes people attended the revivalist meetings out of curiosity, being less interested in sermons and more keen on seeing people “drunk without vodka”, as the awakened persons were occasionally described.²⁷ The enthusiastic group of the movement found biblical passages to justify their expressions of joy. The crippled beggar, after healing, went to “the temple courts, walking and jumping and praising God” (Acts 3:8). God himself was striking hands together, explained the missionary Österblom, quoting Ezekiel 21:17,²⁸ though closer reading would have revealed that it is a reference to judgement and not rejoicing. Exegetical correctness was not the primary concern in the apologetic debates.

But it is impossible to live as an individual or develop as a movement in continuous emotional heat. The Revival needed to be translated into more stable and sustainable ecclesial patterns. An Estonian researcher Jaanus Plaat has argued, “believers of the more peaceful disposition... formed the majority in the movement after its tumultuous initial years”; however, the research has often paid less attention to this main drive than to the extreme margins.²⁹

The revival movement itself, particularly in the 1880s, began critically to evaluate the enthusiastic practices. Self-regulation and identity-seeking processes were formed within the movement. An authoritative mirror or some kind of “measuring stick” was needed – and the revivalist believers and their leaders turned to the Bible for this. The prophetic messages and spiritualistic commands began to be tested by the scriptures. Ways of interpreting the Bible, which enabled believers to reach emotionally moderate spirituality, were highlighted. Again, the Bible was part of the picture, offering an element of balance and critical evaluation.

Stable congregational structures were needed, which would enable young churches to grow. The Baptist congregations in Estonia emerged in 1884 and advice was sought from the German Baptist pastor Adam Reinhold Schiewe in St Petersburg.³⁰ When Schiewe arrived in Haapsalu from St Petersburg in 1884, he saw a spontaneous and heated atmosphere of worship, and – as a response to the situation – he gave a “substantial sermon” to those present.³¹ Scriptures and preaching were used to balance religious enthusiasm.

In addition, biblical imagery and language was used to describe the dangers of ecstatic leanings. A Baptist-Revivalist author described the situation: “Satan despatched powerful spirits from the depths of Hell who appeared like angels of light. They captured poor human souls and made them heavily delusional.”³² This explanation reflects an evaluation issued from a historical perspective, but it came from within the revivalist tradition itself. What is important from this paper’s point of view is the use of biblical language. As a

²⁷ Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 24.

²⁸ Tuttar and Dahl, *Ärkamise aeg*, p. 74.

²⁹ Plaat, *Usuliikumised*, p. 77, see also pp. 74-83.

³⁰ Toivo Pilli, “Eesti baptistid ja nende teoloogilise mõtte kajastumine ajakirjas “Teekäija” kuni 1940” [Estonian Baptists and Their Theology as Reflected in *Teekäija* until 1940], master’s thesis (University of Tartu, 1996), pp. 10, 13.

³¹ *Eesti Baptisti koguduste ajaloolik Album*, p. 9.

³² Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, p. 32.

comparison, 2 Corinthians 11:14 clearly resembles the imagery: “And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” The movement was in danger of being shaken by spontaneous and spiritualist trends, and warning voices were raised. Going astray was caused by lack of biblical teaching and preaching, argued the leaders.³³ There was an attempt to balance the authority of the Spirit with the authority of the Word.

The use of biblical language and imagery inevitably puts a theological stamp on phenomena that perhaps are more psychological than theological. It no doubt makes a difference if you criticise something because of extreme emotionalism or ecstatic excesses, or if you criticise the same phenomenon as a work of Satan. A certain dualism – light and darkness tension – expressed itself also in the way the believers understood external pressures. Suffering and restrictions set by government officials were also part of their experience, and often seen as part of a spiritual battle.

Explaining Persecution and Suffering

The awakened or revivalist believers met opposition both from Tsarist Russian officials and from the existing traditional churches. The believers themselves interpreted the pressures as a challenge which accompanied their faith and as a result of being faithful to the scriptures. Sometimes they understood the suffering as revenge from Satan who was not satisfied that “one after another of his victims were detached [liberated] from him.”³⁴ While the “new teaching” of repentance, conversion and separatism spread more widely, the “persecutions also increased proportionally”.³⁵ August Johannson, an Estonian Baptist author, in 1911, referred back to the religious changes in the 1880s and the trials that the revivalist believers were undergoing: “How much they were dragged to courts, arrested, fined – all this could suffice for a thick book in itself.”³⁶ The “enemies” were “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1), but the latter were glad as this was what Jesus had said: “Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy...” (Luke 6:22-23).³⁷

A Revivalist free church preacher tells a story that is presented with a heroic twist: a young believer was beaten with a bunch of twigs for unauthorised speaking at a revivalist meeting, but he ran “with bleeding back” to the village, “proclaimed boldly the love of Christ”, and was “thankful that he was considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus”.³⁸ Possibly, the reference here is to Philippians 1:29 – “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him...” Experiences of suffering, and ways to interpret the physical, economic or emotional persecution, in the light of scriptures, became a mark of identity for the movement.

³³ Tuttar and Dahl, *Ärkamise aeg*, p. 56.

³⁴ Tuttar and Dahl, *Ärkamise aeg*, p. 67.

³⁵ *Eesti Baptisti koguduste ajaloolik Album*, p. 5.

³⁶ *Eesti Baptisti koguduste ajaloolik Album*, p. 5.

³⁷ Tuttar and Dahl, *Ärkamise aeg*, pp. 75-76.

³⁸ Aleksander Seppur, *Jees. Krist. Evg. Priikoguduse tekkimine ja levinemine Läänemaa ärkamises* [The Beginning and Development of Jesus Christ’s Evangelical Free Church in the Revival of Western Estonia] (Toronto, 1970), p. 16.

As the Revival expanded and took its own route, the tension grew between the adherents of the Revival and the Lutheran pastors: believers were accused of disrespect towards clergy, disobedience towards secular officials and they were even suspected of neglecting their everyday work because of frequent prayer meetings.³⁹ The young Estonian language press also upheld a rather negative attitude, publishing sharp criticism against “the children of the stinky spirit” as the awakened believers were named.⁴⁰ Fines and short-term detentions were imposed on believers by the state authorities, for example for conducting worship services without permission.⁴¹

The West Coast Revival increased the self-consciousness and initiative of the Swedish and Estonian speaking countryside population. The “newborn believers” found a confidence that was expressed in their simple worship, extemporaneous prayers, election of leadership from among themselves, baptisms and communion conducted without any external official permission or control. The growing self-confidence resulted in taking responsibility for the new believers’ church life and making decisions, often in congregational gatherings. Indirectly, this trend harmonised with the wider national awakening, which laid foundations for fresh expressions of Estonian culture. The revivalist believers, despite external difficulties and even persecution, found strength from the Bible – or to be exact, from an interpretation of the Bible which helped them to argue their case. It was a grassroots-level interpretation, sometimes allegorical or literal, sometimes supported by reading secondary literature, however, without systematic theological knowledge. But this newly found faith and confidence prepared the soil for establishing the Estonian Revivalist free churches and Baptist churches. Especially Baptists came to value education and biblical knowledge in the first decades of the twentieth century, establishing a preachers’ seminary in 1922. But this would be another chapter in the story.

Conclusion

This study of the use of the Bible in the West Coast Revival in Estonia, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, throws light on the spirituality of the revivalist believers, a spirituality which helped them to interpret the religious changes they experienced. Indeed, biblical imagery and quotations often functioned as a source of inspiration for spiritual change, conversion experience. In addition, the revivalist believers were seeking biblical support and inspiration for understanding their new faith paradigm, the transformation in the wider religious culture, of which they were part. They sought biblical help in interpreting congregational practices which distanced them from hierarchical ecclesial structures, in explaining their rejection of infant baptism, and attempts to link more closely emotional conversion experience and Christian lifestyle in practice. The awakened believers used the Bible not only as a spiritual “food” but also as a “tool” to argue for the revivalist ideas, thus strengthening the revivalist identity. In addition, the Bible functioned as a source of encouragement for ecclesial separatist tendencies. It helped the revivalist believers

³⁹ Plaat, *Usuliikumised*, p. 71; Woldemar Schultz, ‘Die neue Bewegung unter dem estländischen Landvolk’ [A New Movement among Estonian People], *Baltische Monatsschrift*, vol. XVII (1880), pp. 581-582.

⁴⁰ *Sakala*, no. 4 (24 January 1881), [p. 3].

⁴¹ *Eesti Baptisti koguduste ajaloolik Album*, pp. 5-7; Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, pp. 32-33, 40-45.

to reflect upon and balance some extreme emotional and ecstatic phenomena, and to interpret the persecution experience which came from mainline church officials and Tsarist Russian authorities. The biblical imagery and narratives, which strengthened the revivalist movement, in turn helped to prepare the ground for new free churches in Estonia – the Revivalist free churches and Baptist churches – and the interpretation patterns practised in the context of the Revival were continued in these evangelical traditions.

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