

Brethren to America: Alexander Mack, Jr. (1712–1802) and the Poetic Imagination of a Pilgrim People

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In 1784, Alexander Mack, Jr., known as “Sander,” penned a poem in response to the death of his friend Christopher Sauer II (1721–1784). Entitled “Nun bricht der Hütten Haus entzwei” (“Now Breaks the Cottage House in Half”), the poem details the final stages of a person’s transition into eternity:

Now breaks this house of earth in twain,
now the body can decay;
the pilgrimage is now over;
now will my spirit recover;
the soul has now won the fight;
my Jesus has overcome the enemy.
To Him alone be the honor.

Now I will enter into Jesus who died for me.
He has won through pain and death a refuge for my soul.
He has prepared for me a better house in Heaven
that I may praise Him in it forever and ever.¹

Christopher Sauer II—Mack’s beloved friend, confidant, and brother in Christ—had finished his pilgrimage on earth, and the conclusion of that journey was not mere death but the sweet embrace of Christ Jesus. In German, the description is all the more personal as the phrase *Pilger Reise*, translated “pilgrimage,” literally means “pilgrim’s travel.”

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1 Samuel Heckman, ed., *The Religious Poetry of Alexander Mack, Jr.* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1912), 43, 45.

Even in moments of profound grief, Mack's poetry alludes to a "spiritual vision [of a] true homeland beyond the horizon of this world."²

Poetic reflections like this capture an inward and outward pilgrimage that marked the lives of colonial Brethren in the new world. Through mediums of poetry and hymns, Mack captured and communicated the Brethren immigration narrative as a transitional self-awareness marked by the meta-theme of pilgrimage. Brethren in colonial Pennsylvania were interacting with religious "others" in a new context.

All German Brethren churches trace their lineage back to the fusion of Radical Pietist and Anabaptist themes present at the beginning of the Brethren movement in Schwarzenau, Germany, in 1708. Sander Mack's father, Alexander Mack, Sr. (1679–1735), is the progenitor of the Brethren family. Whereas Mack Sr. devoted his energies to doctrinal and didactic writing, his son, Sander Mack (1712–1803), chose to do a significant amount of writing through poetry and song. His works fittingly capture the devotional understanding of truth and theology that marks the Brethren witness. Far from being a systematic people, Brethren maintain the importance of a lived theology at their center rather than depending on a propositional scholastic creed or statement of faith. Poetry and hymns became Sander Mack's way to mark this new people in a different world. The early Brethren were first and foremost to be a pilgrim people of worship.

The depth and discernment in Sander Mack's poetry reveal a simple (though not simplistic) faith rooted in his Brethren beliefs, shaped by streams of Anabaptism and Radical Pietism. Mack's writings reveal a deep sensitivity to Scripture, an awareness of the larger narrative arc of the Bible, and a high view of the gathered church. These three subthemes find their poetic meaning in the pilgrimage imagery of his poetry and hymnody. Anabaptists and Radical Pietists understood the church as distinct from the world. They were familiar with persecution from those whose faith had become wed with political power. The role of the people of God in Radical Pietist, Anabaptist, and, subsequently, Brethren literature is one of travelers bearing witness to their God not by coercion or power but through a pilgrimage marked by patience, suffering, hope, and worship.

The journey from Europe to America was a moment born out of necessity for the Brethren as they sought freedom for their religious expression, in reaction to the reformation landscape of continental Europe. The emigration to America granted the Brethren freedom to worship—a freedom that had not been afforded them in continental Europe. Religious pressure and economic

² Dale Stoffer, "Alexander Mack Jr.: The Pilgrim of Love and Light," *Brethren Life & Thought* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 16.

necessities had combined to make migration to North America essential. Two large groups left—in 1719 and 1729, respectively.

In 1729, Mack Sr. himself led about 120 Brethren to America.³ His leadership, alongside that of his son, Sander, enabled the evangelistic zeal of the Brethren to spread quickly in America; by 1770, congregations had been founded in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas.⁴ The worship services of these congregations included lively preaching and singing as Brethren sought to live a devout and Christ-like life by maintaining their principles of nonconformity, nonresistance, and nonswearing.

The Brethren immigration narrative, however, would be both productive and haunting as they settled in colonial Pennsylvania. While the new world provided a welcome respite from persecution for them, it also labeled them as outsiders. This outsider status was marked by their use of the German language amid an anglophone world. They also refused to take up arms in a world of violence and war, and they settled close to each other and to neighboring German sects in a world of English politics and customs.

In Germantown, Pennsylvania, the Brethren met their first American neighbors—German Mennonites and English Quakers. The German Mennonites shared the Brethren's ethnic background but not always their piety or evangelistic zeal. The English Quakers shared the Brethren's peace interests but not their ethnic identity that was anchored in the alternative witness of the church.

In this tumultuous new world, the Brethren's very act of clinging to one another only solidified their identification as a religious other. It was into this world that Mack Jr., henceforth referred to simply as "Mack," would have reminded colonial Brethren of their pilgrim identity and called them to a witness of worship and obedience amid a world plagued by difficulty and strife.

3 Few Brethren remained in Europe. Those that did joined other Pietistic groups or the Mennonites. The Brethren had been fully transplanted to America by 1750.

4 Sauer II and his father, Christopher Sauer I (1695–1758), were known for their printing establishment that served the German-speaking settlers in America. Sauer Press published the three editions of the Sauer Bible—the first European language Bible printed in America—along with almanacs, books, magazines, and newspapers. The Sauers used a specific typeface that was easier for German readers to read. Christopher Sauer II would suffer severely during the American Revolution when his press was confiscated and he was tortured for his unwillingness to support the revolutionary cause. Brethren of the period, by and large, did not support the revolutionary cause, believing they were to submit to the Crown according to the commands of Romans 13:1–7.

The Beginning of a Brethren-American Identity in Prose

Mack's poetry communicates pilgrimage themes of separation from the world and of hope. As an alien in a foreign land that was often hostile, Mack remained steadfast in his hope, using Pietist understandings of Christ as the "Lamb of God," "the Bridegroom," and the "Good and Faithful Shepherd" whose teachings are "sweet as sugar" and "sweeter than honey."

Mack's writings reveal the creative synthesis of Anabaptism and Radical Pietism as colonial Brethren engaged their new religious neighbors—German- and English-speaking alike. This literary synthesis in meter became a sort of "poetics of Brethrenism." Whereas Anabaptism grounded faith in one's obedience to the example of Jesus, Pietism and its "Radical" variant emphasized the inward journey of the heart. Coupled together, the two describe a transformative pilgrimage in which followers of Christ are transformed from the inside out as they often live counterculturally to the currents of the world. To describe this journey, Brethren theologian Scott Holland notes that Mack's writings are "touched by mystery, metaphor, wonder, love and transcendence in the romance of faith."⁵ Therefore, he concludes, Mack writes "very confessionally" all while presenting deep theological themes "emotionally and poetically."⁶

Two of Mack's poems in a 1795 edition of *Der kleine oder kurze Sprüche und Gebätlein, Aus dem meistens unbekanntten Werklein des Thomae a Kempis, Germantown, 1795* (*The Little Kempis, or Short Sayings and Brief Prayers from the, for the most part unknown, Minor Work of Thomas à Kempis, Germantown, 1795*) provide an example of his poetics of Brethrenism. The first and second stanzas of one of them captures the emotional and poetic detailing of the pilgrimage of faith:

A soul which loves God
Finds anguish in this world.
What it loves outside Jesus
Is beset by terror and distress.
Therefore, Jesus calls to it
"Come, in me is joy and peace."

"I have overcome the world,"
Says Jesus Christ consolingly.
"I have bound its strongest man
Through the splendor of my light."
Therefore, He calls ever and ever
"O dear souls come to me."⁷

5 Scott Holland, "Sander Mack and the Poetics of Pietism," *Brethren Life & Thought* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 108.

6 Holland, "Sander Mack and the Poetics of Pietism," 108.

7 Heckman, *Religious Poetry*, 37.

Love juxtaposed with anguish. Terror and distress contrasted with joy and peace. These emotionally vivid descriptions kept the hope of Christ from being mere pie-in-the-sky theology. They served as both a narrative and poetic foundation to the pilgrim identity of colonial Brethren.

Mack's poetry would have assisted colonial Brethren in the exploration of their identity in the new world. It was a calling back to their Radical Pietist and Anabaptist heritage—a balance of individual and community, internal and external witness, head and heart, and, most importantly, the ongoing maintenance of the Word-Spirit organic relationship at the heart of their witness. In a diary entry dated “The fifteenth of July, 1786,” Mack penned a poem reminding himself of the Apostle Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 13:13 to love. This was the mission of the soul's pilgrimage—to love like Jesus.

Faith, love, hope,
Reach the goal
Through quiet modesty.
What God hates, avoid.
To bow down, to suffer, to endure,
Bring us happiness.

What God commands to believe
This no one shall take from me
In spite of all the lack of faith.
What God's word bids us love,
That I will daily practice
Through my pilgrim's time.

When my time has passed,
Then I find my hopes;
In blessed eternity
Where all things stand in view
Are faith and love and trust,
My peace and blessedness.⁸

The Apostle Paul argues that, of faith, hope, and love, “the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13 NIV). In a poetic circle, Mack returns to the source of love and places his trust in Christ, his source of “peace and blessedness.” Reflections like this offered prayers of lament and hope within a world that was foreign and sometimes hostile toward colonial Brethren.

Patrick Erben writes of two “iconic instances” for German groups such as the Brethren.⁹ The first was the publishing of *Martyrs Mirror* by the Ephrata

8 Heckman, *Religious Poetry*, 71.

9 Patrick M. Erben, *A Harmony of the Spirits: Translation and the Language of Community in Early Pennsylvania* (Williamsburg, VA: The University of North Carolina

community, an offshoot of the colonial Brethren. Published in the 1740s and 1750s, its detailed stories of martyrdom were translated by groups like the Brethren onto their current political context, “of a province rife with fears of war and mandatory armament.”¹⁰ Mack was involved in this translation; the book’s reflections on the martyrdoms of early Christian witnesses would have buttressed the pilgrimage motif evident in his writing. Brethren were called to be faithful to Jesus; though this world might take their physical lives, Jesus held their eternal lives.

Secondly, Erben lists German sectarian participation in the “Friendly Association for Regaining and Preserving Peace with the Indians” during the Seven Years’ War as revitalizing a common spiritual foundation among German groups, noting that it stressed their common history of persecution and suffering.¹¹ The Brethren, having experienced the isolation of being the “other,” collected funds to reimburse native peoples for land taken by the English. They rallied to care for native peoples and offered them asylum when backlash from skirmishes on the Pennsylvania frontier devolved into rogue violence by eastern colonialists toward Native Americans. Brethren chose peace and hospitality over violence and retribution. Such a posture was fitting for a pilgrim people.

These “iconic instances” marked Mack’s life and the pilgrimage of colonial Brethren. The threat of violence and division was always palpable in his world, yet his writings never communicate anxiety. This pilgrimage imagery is pronounced nowhere more strongly than in the annual poems Mack wrote on his birthday—a day that caused him to pause and reflect. In a 1779 birthday poem he writes, “Once again a year is gone/O thou rock, eternity!//All my ardent longing goes far beyond this life/towards this true fatherland/for I’m a stranger here below.”¹² The longing for the true fatherland, which is hauntingly evident in the poem, speaks to the eschatological hope of the colonial Brethren that likely assisted their weathering of the many challenges and setbacks they experienced.

The following year, Mack journals: “I can no more consider what happens in this world/For on these pilgrims’ roads there shines for me a different light. . . . What brings me pain but helps me on, what brings me joy but holds

Press, 2012), 245, Kindle Edition. While German Mennonites would have utilized Ephrata for publication of *Martyrs’ Mirror*, they probably did so pragmatically—for financial reasons—as they would not identify with Philadelphia ideals. German Mennonites had the resources for such a printing, and Ephrata accepted the task for economic reasons.

10 Erben, *A Harmony of the Spirits*, 245.

11 Erben, 245.

12 Heckman, *Religious Poetry*, 152.

me back/My true rest I find up yonder when my brief pilgrimage is done.”¹³ Amid the obstacles of colonial Pennsylvania, Mack and the colonial Brethren found peace in their eschatology as they interpreted their current situation alongside Scripture. Their reading of the Bible also reinforced their recognition of, involvement with, and care of other outsiders experiencing persecution.¹⁴ It’s quite telling that in his final birthday entry (1803), at the age of ninety, Mack refers to himself as “the poor pilgrim whom the mercy of God has sustained until he is ninety years old.”¹⁵ Pilgrimage, with its many hills and valleys, was always near to Mack’s heart. It was a frame of reference for how colonial Brethren understood themselves in the new republic.

Christian Bunner identifies eight themes central to the Pietist poetry and hymnody of Mack’s period:

... the communication of religious assurance through individual experience of God; renewal and transformation of life through the Holy Spirit; the critique of dead, conformist church spirituality; the awakening of hope in an imminent eschatological kingdom of God; the transformation of believers by the divine Being; the formation of fellowship; the encouragement of active expressions of love; and the sharing of one’s faith.¹⁶

These same eight themes appear in Mack’s poetry. One finds an ongoing travelogue of experiences with God coupled with the ongoing transformation of both person and perspective by the activity of the Holy Spirit. Consider the following poetic rendering of Matthew 25:31–46 in which Mack, in the seventh stanza, picks up the pilgrim motif for the Brethren in the new world:

I was a stranger in the world and you entertained me so that I placed my easy burden upon you. I was sick and I was in prison and you visited me, and you took care of me in accordance with the custom.¹⁷

One wonders if Mack reflected on this after his closest friend, Sauer II, had his printing press confiscated and was incarcerated by revolutionaries for refusing to support the revolutionary cause.

The Brethren’s theme of pilgrimage is continually animated by an eschatological hope forming the witness of the church and calling them to a generous spirituality with others. As an encouragement to Brethren on their pilgrimage,

13 Heckman, 152.

14 Colonial Brethren would be staunch opponents of slavery and frontline responders to the plight of Native Americans.

15 Heckman, *Religious Poetry*, 152.

16 Christian Bunner, ed., *Lieder des Pietismus aus dem 17. and 18. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003), 235–36.

17 Heckman, *Religious Poetry*, 93.

the first stanza of Mack's poem "Ein in Hoffnung gesungenes Liedlein vor eine schwach-glabige Seele" (A little song sung in hope for a soul weak in faith), declares:

Every soul that loves God
 Will finally succeed!
 God can yet defeat the enemy
 That brings temptation to weak hearts
 In distress—even in death
 God grants His Bread of Heaven.¹⁸

A synthesis of heart/emotion (Radical Pietism) and discipleship/obedience (Anabaptism) enlivens this call to hope.

As the Pietist witness called Brethren to a new life in Christ, the Anabaptist witness anchored that conversion in a life of discipleship and community. To encourage this pilgrim community of colonial Brethren, Mack would often translate biblical events into poetry mixed with contemporary application. In one journal entry, he describes the passion of Christ, detailing Good Friday in poetic prose:

Eight o'clock.
 Dressed in white, Thou comest now
 To Pilate once again,
 For nothing 'gainst Thee can be found
 Save only my guilt of sins.

Nine o'clock.
 Wicked men are scourging Thee,
 But the guilt I must confess
 And in justice I should suffer
 What the mad heathen do to Thee.

Ten o'clock.
 The crown of thorns Jesus must wear,
 The purple robe, the jeers and scorn,
 All for me unworthy sinner,
 And in addition He is beaten . . .
 Three o'clock in the afternoon.
 Now that all should be fulfilled
 Which the Scriptures have foretold,
 And that they might quench His thirst,
 They have a sponge filled with vinegar.

And the precious Lamb of God

18 Heckman, 113.

Drinks it on the cross's beam,
 Bows His head and suffers death
 So that mercy I can receive.¹⁹

In light of Christ's great poverty on our behalf, Mack would note in a later poem entitled "Die Reiche Armuth" (Wealthy poverty) that worldly riches are not the same as spiritual riches, alluding to the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12) as the way of Jesus. He challenged colonial Brethren to not view economic poverty as a sign of spiritual maturity, as some were prone to do. Instead, he noted that the pilgrimage of faith is judged not by economic standing but by a sacrifice on behalf of the world—a sacrifice motivated solely by the love of God.

Blessed are they that are poor in spirit,
 Riches do not endure,
 Poverty nourishes not,
 The poor man deceives himself
 Unless he seeks God.
 The half-way kind of man
 Finds nowhere any peace
 Until lowliness and elevation
 Serve him equally!
 For Heaven is hers! (That is, the poor's.)²⁰

Though in this world the Brethren would experience hardship, strife, and persecution, Mack called them to take heart in the God they worshiped. He assured them that the kingdom of heaven was not for those with great economic prowess but rather for those who remained faithful to Christ Jesus and identified their posture toward the world with his humble life of service.

The Anabaptist-Radical Pietist Synthesis of Mack's Poetry of Brethren Pilgrimage

Mack masterfully weaves together the themes of Brethren identity into a seamless whole; nowhere does he identify certain themes or concepts as either Pietist or Anabaptist. Instead, in a poetic narrative, he invites colonial Brethren to worshipfully consider their distinct identity in a foreign land.

For contemporary readers, however, it is helpful to understand the themes that Mack employs and to categorize them appropriately. This fosters a deeper appreciation of the complexity of themes that emanate from his simple prose.

From Pietism and Radical Pietism, Mack calls colonial Brethren to a variant of Christ mysticism that is evident in earlier Pietist writings. He uses the bride and bridegroom from Song of Solomon to communicate the love of

19 Heckman, 102–103.

20 Heckman, 119.

Christ for his church. The theme of love occurs throughout his writings, and he references the kiss of peace or love as an expression of fraternal love to be shared by the Brethren.

Evident also in Mack's poetry and hymn writing is a creative spirit. According to Brethren theologian Dale Stoffer, this "creativity had disappeared for the most part among the Mennonites by this time."²¹ Mack's creative spirit always held closely to Pietist, hermeneutical emphases of reading the part in light of the whole and comparing Scripture with Scripture.

Brethren took from Anabaptism a high view of the visible church, understood as the gathered community of regenerate disciples of Christ. Out of this theology, Mack picks up Anabaptist themes of obedience and the commitment to discipline. Accountability and fidelity to the gospel were paramount for the witness of the church. Likewise, Mack's theology of baptism is in line with the Anabaptist view of immersion baptism as a public modeling of the inner to outer transformation of the believer, a transformation that serves as a strong theme in Mack's poetry.

Mack's distinctiveness, however, comes in elements of his poetry that are derived from both Pietism/Radical Pietism and Anabaptism. He calls Brethren to nonresistance in a hostile world; he stresses that a new life must be conformed to Christ in a world that is often antagonistic to the Brethren's radical obedience; and he holds in creative tension the outward call of discipleship alongside the vital role of the Holy Spirit in all aspects of the Christian life.

This inner and outer synthesis forms a pilgrim people who are humbly yielded toward God and one another and who possess an extraordinary hospitality to the "least of these" (Mt 25:40). Mack's poetics of pilgrimage become synonymous with his poetics of Brethrenism. Both anchor themselves in a hope that transcends the hardships of life. Both point colonial Brethren toward Jesus. And both remind these early Brethren of his call to go and do likewise—a benediction given to his disciples with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37 NIV).

Most importantly, Mack's Christocentric hope is a fusion of both his Radical Pietist and Anabaptist moorings. Poetry became a vehicle to detail his spiritual reading of Scripture, a means to capture the Word-Spirit nature of Brethren theology. He calls colonial Brethren to utilize "spiritual eyes" in their exegesis of Scripture and society. Furthermore, the Spirit's influence will be marked by love: "[Above] all preserve love, for thus one preserves light. The good God, who is the pure impartial love, can and will supply gradually where insight is lacking here or there."²²

21 Stoffer, "Alexander Mack Jr.," 18.

22 Stoffer, 444-45.

Hope, unity, and love serve as the indicators of the true church. Whether in times of celebration or crisis, these outward signs communicated the inner commitments to both Word and Spirit for the Brethren. In an expansive poem for Christopher Sauer II's *Geistliches Magazien* (*Religious Magazine*), Mack pens a poem under the pseudonym "Theophilus," literally translated "lover of God." Stanzas three, five, nine, and the concluding stanza, number seventy-eight, capture his countercultural call to pilgrimage. The stanzas in between are a retelling of all of human history. The essence of the poem is that those called to true love of God have always been the true, faithful, pilgrim people of God. Mack reminds his readers that, within their context,

Agriculture is widely practiced
 By good and evil as well.
 Hardly has one time to love one's neighbor
 Unless one is willing to be very industrious.
 Famine greets us from afar, exhorting
 That we do our best here below.

Commerce has long flourished
 And is very lucrative today,
 Even though many go bankrupt
 And forfeit their lives and souls.
 Yet few meditate thereon thoroughly,
 Most of them preferring a pleasant day.

But avarice rules
 And pretends to [hold great] honesty.
 Feigned wealth has led astray
 Thousands with its fine appearance.
 Poverty even is infected
 With that which stains both body and soul.²³

Then, alluding to Genesis 19, reminding his readers of Lot's wife, who looked back on her creaturely comforts instead of being steadfast in her forward commitment to God, Mack challenges colonial Brethren with the following:

If doubt seeks to seduce us,
 Let us be mindful of Lot's wife.
 God's mercy alone be with us,
 And let us hope that none will stay behind;

For disobedience has the effect
 Of making the heart as hard as stone.

23 Heckman, *Religious Poetry*, 167–99.

Be mindful of Lot's wife!²⁴

Though the journey could be brutal for colonial Brethren, in their pilgrimage they were never to shrug off the costly call of Jesus for a fleeting call to comfort. In no uncertain words, Mack was reminding the Brethren not to pilfer away their precious hours and days when eternity belonged to them in Christ.

Such commitments sustained the Brethren as they took root in their new contexts. Mack's use of worship, hymnody, and poetry, inspired by his Anabaptist and Radical Pietist heritage, exhorted the colonial Brethren in their pilgrimage of faith. It is only fitting that in a later poem titled "Reim-Gedicht vor die liebe Jugend. Von der Weissheit" (Poem for our dear young people on wisdom), Mack implores youth, the next generation of Brethren, to discern the wisdom of Jesus. As his last stanza reminds them (and us), "The worldly wisdom of this earth does not recognize this wisdom [of Jesus]; it [worldly wisdom] must become mere foolishness when this noble light shines forth."

The poetics of pilgrimage within Brethrenism is a reminder not only of the Brethren's mission in the world but also their belonging. The peculiar witness of the Brethren, revealed by Mack's poetry, was as a pilgrim people who belonged to Jesus Christ. Poetry and hymnody called them to worship. This marked the life of the colonial Brethren; to know them was to sing with them, and to sing with them was to know their theology. Their theology was deeply impacted by the poetic retelling of their immigration narrative that brought them from the Palatinate of Germany to the burgeoning colonial city of Philadelphia.

The reminder from Mack's poem (at the beginning of this article) after the death of his friend holds even richer meaning in light of this pilgrimage identity. When Mack breathed his last breath, did he revisit these lines that he had penned earlier?

Now I will enter into Jesus who died for me.
 He has won through pain and death a refuge for my soul.
 He has prepared for me a better house in Heaven
 that I may praise Him in it forever and ever.²⁵

For a persecuted, pilgrim people, then and now, these words capture the deepest longings of the human heart. They tell an immigration narrative through story and song. Like the call to the Israelites to continually remember their exodus story out of Egypt, Mack's poetry called colonial Brethren to remember their story, to remember Jesus, and to remember one another.

For modern audiences, Brethren and otherwise, Mack's poetry and hymnody offer us the opportunity to pause and reflect on a little-known people

24 Heckman, 199.

25 Heckman, 45.

group of the early American republic. His reflections allow us to appreciate the hardships that immigrants and refugees have undertaken to find freedom in the new world (then and now). At the heart of his poetry is the recognition that followers of Jesus are all refugees as we pilgrimage from the kingdom of the world into the kingdom of God—from a world of many kingdoms and boundary lines toward a larger hope that transcends the many ways we carve up the world. With our eyes toward the sun, we pilgrimage toward our “better house in Heaven,” all while living Heaven here and now.