

## LAURENCE OLIPHANT: FINANCIAL SOURCES FOR HIS ACTIVITIES IN PALESTINE IN THE 1880s

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*Laurence Oliphant's interest in the development of Jewish settlement in Ottoman Palestine preceded his interest in the plight of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. While his intensive involvement in these matters is well known, especially in modern Israel, the fact that the funds for his largesse were contributed by the Christadelphian Brotherhood has not previously been published. The present article brings to light material from the archives of this sect, and thus, too, the motivation behind these efforts.*

Of all the Gentiles who assisted the Zionist enterprise at the end of the nineteenth century, the best known and most popular is Laurence Oliphant. He was a Victorian gentleman, wealthy and erudite; he was friend to princes and aristocrats, not only of his own country, but also of Europe. He was an author and journalist, part diplomat and/or secret agent in Her Majesty's Service; he was a former Member of Parliament and a religious mystic. Such was the versatile man who devoted himself to aiding the Jews in Palestine, then under Ottoman rule (Oliphant 1878; Schneider 1942; Henderson 1956; Taylor 1982). The present article aims to describe Oliphant's connection with an esoteric Christian sect, the Christadelphians, and show that they supplied him with the funds for his philanthropic activities. From correspondence kept in the archives of the sect, we can learn much about his motives and attitudes towards the Jews.

Already in 1856, Oliphant showed an interest in Montefiore's plan to build a railway in the Holy Land — indeed, this would remain one of his pet projects to his dying day. But the situation of the Jews of Eastern Europe came to his attention only years later, when he toured Russia, in 1878. There he became aware of their plight, and was deeply impressed by their unwavering longing for their historic homeland. This experience led him to come and see the country for himself. He traveled to Palestine, toured it thoroughly, and developed a comprehensive plan for Jewish settlement, east of the River Jordan, the first of its kind. He continued to Kushta (Istanbul), the Ottoman capital, in an effort to bring his plan to the Sultan's notice and win his approval. Unfortunately, the Sultan was becoming increasingly suspicious of European interference in his affairs. He saw in Oliphant's plan — not without justification — yet another imperialistic plot. Oliphant was forced to cool his heels for an entire year without results.

On his return to Britain, he tried to reach the ear of the authorities and, in an effort to present his plan to a wider public, published it in a book *The Land of Gilead* (1880). These efforts were also in vain. With the outbreak of anti-Semitic riots in Russia in the late 1870s, Oliphant was moved to alert public opinion, and wrote stirring letters to *The Times*. As a result, he was co-opted to the Mansion House Committee which had been formed to organize relief for the victims of the riots, and was sent to Vienna as the Committee's forward field agent.

However much the Jews longed for the Land of Israel, apparently they longed no less for a saviour. The appearance in the right place, at the right time, of the distinguished Laurence Oliphant seemed to them to fit the bill — they even mistakenly conferred on him the title 'Sir'. They followed his every word and deed — but his suggestion was that they

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emigrate to America. He explained that, although this was contrary to his beliefs and conscience, he was doing it at the behest of the Mansion House Committee which had sent him. Nevertheless, he continued to dream and talk about settlement in Palestine. He continued his journey to Roumania and Russia. The Jews listened to him, excited and fascinated. Money was raised for settlements, and he was even nominated as President of 'Hovevei Zion', an organization that had recently been formed in some Jewish centres to propagate new ideas with regard to the fate of the Jews. Not interested in such formalities, Oliphant declined the offer politely. His sole interest was to help victims of the pogroms to settle in the Land of Gilead. When he realized that the Ottoman Sultan would not allow massive Jewish settlement under any conditions, and that there was no way to bring refugees to Palestine, he decided to buy a house in Haifa, where he settled in 1882. In this way, he became the first non-Jewish Zionist to put his belief into practice. Oliphant's failure to carry his plan of settling the Gilead to fruition was an unfortunate turn of events for early Zionism. Its success might have changed the pattern of emigration of eastern European Jewry fundamentally, making a difference of historical dimensions. Much has been written about Oliphant's motives for his Zionist activities — and we will add some of his own remarks on this matter — but none of his biographers (Oliphant 1878; Schneider 1942; Henderson 1956; Taylor 1982) or other researchers (Wilson 1961; Ilan 1985) have raised the question of his financial sources. It was assumed that he was extremely rich, so this subject was never raised. Indeed, at various times during his career there was ample evidence of his wealth. However, this assumption ignores the fact that he handed his fortune over to the Rev. Alexander Harris, when he joined that 'Prophet's' commune in the United States (Schneider 1942, 25–40). When he separated himself from Harris, as the result of serious disagreements, he succeeded in recouping only part of his money, and that only after lengthy court action. His frequent contributions to the London Times and the New York Post assured him a respectable and constant income, but his last book (Oliphant 1885), which dealt with his mystic-religious attitudes, was not received well. His friends even feared for his sanity. It is evident, therefore, that his private funds would not have been adequate for his extensive philanthropic activities.

The discovery of Oliphant's contacts with the Christadelphians (The Christadelphian Archives 1880–1889) sheds some light on this question. These contacts, recorded in the archives of the sect in Birmingham, UK, are the topic to be discussed here. In order to understand the nature of these contacts, it is relevant to discuss first some aspects of nineteenth-century Christian attitudes towards the Jews and the Holy Land, including those of the Christadelphians.

Contrary to what some sections of the Jewish public may believe, these attitudes were varied, and were not necessarily hostile. Some differences of opinion may have arisen among the denominations in Christendom on this very point, especially in Britain, Oliphant's country. Every important political, social or economic development influences the religious attitudes of its protagonists and is, in turn, influenced by them. Thus, one can trace the effects that the American striving for religious tolerance, the rationality of the French Revolution, and Napoleon's campaign in Palestine had on the thinking of the British religious establishment and the intelligentsia from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Religious tolerance, anathema to the clerical establishment, extended even towards the Jews. Much as the ideas of the French Revolution were feared as heretical, it caused thinking people to accept that opinions other than those of the bishops were not necessarily those of the devil.

The Bible was a major factor in people's lives and thoughts, and the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt and Palestine brought the Holy Land to people's consciousness as a geographical reality, rather than a religious abstraction. Reports from Egypt, Sinai and Palestine caused great excitement in Europe, and led to a feeling that great events were

about to happen. As a result, a widespread Evangelical movement arose in Britain, whose most influential figure was Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury (Hodder 1886; Hammond 1923). His forceful personality and leadership led to a popular belief in the immediate Second Coming of the Messiah. According to the Scriptures, however, this would happen only if the Jews, God's ancient people, returned to their homeland, where they would recognize Jesus as the Messiah. England was therefore in duty bound to act, to work towards the return of the Jews to the Promised Land. On the basis of this belief, money was collected to pay for the great number of varied missionary bodies that were established. A Jewish convert to Christianity, the Rt. Rev. Michael Solomon Alexander, was even appointed Bishop of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, results were minimal compared with the efforts invested. As Shaftesbury was heard to remark on the bishop's death in 1848: 'Have we conceived a merely human project and then magnified it to be a decree of the Almighty?' Few Jews were asked what they thought about all this, but one remarked: 'The Hill of Zion is not a likely place for a Jew to forsake the faith of his fathers' (Warburton 1844).

Such widely held Christian views would naturally attract men of action too, especially in the heady days of the Victorian British Empire. Not least of these were Lord Palmerston and Disraeli, Lord Beaconsfield. Many others saw in the Return of the Jews a gripping, heroic, economic and, of course, political topic. Many wrote, preached and spoke to support the Return. Worthy of mention is a young officer acting against Muhammad Ali, ruler of Egypt in 1840, who was sent to Damascus to investigate the anti-Jewish blood libels. His report reads like an early manifesto of the Zionist Movement, years before that was founded. His name: Charles Henry Churchill. On leaving the Army he published his report in book form (Churchill 1853).

Shaftesbury's movement was active enough to arouse opposition. Some expressed the belief that the Messiah would come in his own good time, and needed no encouragement. Contrary to the general belief in the conversion of the Jews to Christianity as a prerequisite to the Second Coming, other groups interpreted scriptural prophecy as meaning that the Jews should not be persuaded to convert, but should remain faithful to God just as God had chosen them. Amongst these groups were the Christadelphians. Mention must be made of the fact that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, many Protestant groups — and also one or two Jewish ones — led by charismatic men of the cloth felt that the Second Coming was imminent. Best known are the Millerites, the Campbellites, the Mormons, the Christadelphians, a group under a certain Rev. Adams that tried to settle in Jaffa, the Rev. Harris (under whose spell Oliphant came) and, with a difference, the German Templers, who also settled in Palestine (Carmel 1987, 1990). (The difference, in the case of the Templers, was that they believed that the Jews had long lost their role in the divine scheme of things and were therefore irrelevant to the Second Coming. Hence, they *themselves, the Templers, were God's People — Gottes Volk*). *None of these groups consulted the Jews.*

This, then, was the solidly established ideological ground that served Oliphant in his determination to help things happen. However, he was the only believer in the Jews' part in the scheme of things who actually came to live in Palestine.

The Christadelphian Movement, Brothers in Jesus, was founded by an English doctor called John Thomas (1805–1871) at the end of the 1850s. A traumatic experience while crossing the Atlantic caused him to re-evaluate his Christian beliefs. He joined some of the groups mentioned earlier, but quickly came to question the preaching of each leader, was expelled and moved on to the next. Finally, he ended up with a small band of disciples who believed in his interpretation of the holy scripture. One of his principal tenets was to oppose all forms of violence. During the American Civil War (1861), he objected to his followers being mobilized for the fighting, and led a successful struggle on their behalf with the authorities. It was he who coined the phrase 'conscientious objector', which has since then

been accepted as a term for people requesting exemptions from military service on moral grounds, in many countries. On his return to Britain for a lecture tour, he found wide acceptance for his ideas (Wilson 1961). He wrote a number of books, the chief one being 'Elpis Israel', The Hope of Israel (Thomas 1849), in which he explained his theology. It is not always easy to follow his reasoning or his style of writing, but the basics are as follows (Thomas 1849, 1866, 1868, 1877): Only the Old and New Testaments are valid and sacred. All additions are superfluous and even harmful. *Continuous study of the Holy Writ is the only way to reach an understanding which can help the individual to act in order to bring Prophecy to realization. There is no system of seniority among the Brothers in Jesus, and no hierarchy. No one is the leader and no one is led. Every Brother has equal standing in the Brotherhood.* In distancing himself from Church dogmas, he abandoned all customs which he regarded as pagan. Amongst these was the belief in Satan, Hell and Original Sin. Sin was regarded as a matter of the behaviour of the adult, while the source of evil was considered to be the Vatican. Although Thomas claimed not to establish new dogmas, he did suggest a scenario as regards the Day of Redemption and The End of Days. During the Millennium — 1000 years — Jesus would reign as God's representative on earth, with the assistance of his Brothers, the Christadelphians and the Jews.

Thomas saw the members of the Brotherhood as Jews, except for an accident of birth, whereas the Jews were the Chosen People, who were only lacking in the necessary belief in Jesus. But they must maintain their Judaic faith, otherwise they would lose their status as the Chosen People. At the end of 1000 years, all evil would be destroyed and the righteous would become immortal. At this point, Jesus would return the Divine Sceptre to God, who would then be revealed and would continue to rule without intermediary, with Jerusalem his Eternal Capital. Moderation is axiomatic to the sect in all matters of faith, but tensions sometimes arise, due the absence of any authority to decide on issues that arise. As in any group of human beings, differences of opinion, and even power struggles, are inevitable, with the personalities involved having their effect on the discussions. Thomas, who found hierarchies distasteful and, perhaps because of his own self-effacing character, wanted no leadership amongst the Brothers. He was an accomplished scholar in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, a brilliant preacher, but no leader. He saw in leadership nothing but the ambition to rule others. Hence, he built an unstructured organization, with no officials or ways to appoint them, and no chain of command. It is clear that there were no priests or churches. And yet he was followed as 'first among equals' by his pupil, Robert Roberts (d. 1898), an able organizer, who became editor of the sect's magazine, The Christadelphian, and so became the most influential member of the sect.

The members of the sect act within independent 'ecclesias', in which freedom of expression is the rule. The largest of these ecclesias, which is also the most influential, is the one in Birmingham, which is called the Central Fellowship. It is there that the magazine is published and where the consensus is established. Roberts, as editor of the sect's journal, often refused to print opinions opposed to that of the central fellowship. There were even cases when ecclesias were expelled from the Brotherhood. These events aroused resistance to Roberts' ascendancy and to his ideas of leadership, opposed as they were to those of his predecessor and mentor. As the years went by, it was realized that minority opinions could become those of the majority after some time, so why expel members? Differences of opinion arose mainly on theological questions, such as the nature of Jesus, but there were also simpler problems, such as how to arrange visits by speakers from one ecclesia to another for purposes of study. Some 20% of the Brothers are active as speakers in other ecclesias, and some are of course more in demand than others.

A community of Brothers is formed in a town or village when there are ten members or more. The life of the community revolves almost exclusively around study sessions. There are no set prayers. At every meeting, after bread breaking, which is almost the only ritual adopted by them, any member can suggest a prayer for anything he pleases, and make up the wording himself. Non-members can attend meetings, and this is how new members are attracted to the sect. A member who marries must persuade his spouse to join within a given time or leave the Brotherhood. There is a wide choice of occupations open to members, but no kind of Government service is permitted, so there are no policemen, lawyers or civil servants among the Christadelphians. They do not vote at elections, or join political parties or similar organizations.

At the beginning, the Brotherhood paid no attention to educating the younger generation, because they believed that the fulfillment of Prophecy was imminent. However, as the various days of expectation passed, a start was made in teaching the children. It was done gently without pressure. At the age of 13, a youngster was entitled to join the Brotherhood. He was then baptized, like anyone else who joined the sect (Thomas 1869). The disappointment with the delay of the day of redemption, together with continuing belief in the Second Coming, led the Brotherhood to rent large halls for gatherings to discuss these problems. A number of books have been written (Jannaway 1920; Walker 1923; Roberts 1940; Norris 1948) attempting to explain the delay, and to map out a way for the sect to continue. Most of the Brothers belonged to low income groups; but they did not believe in the 'joy of riches'. They were active in deeds of charity amongst themselves, as befits brothers. Their only outgoing charity was, and is, to assist Jews in the Land of Israel.

In 1865, the sect numbered some 1000 members in ecclesias all over England. By 1950, there were 15, 000 in England alone and considerable communities all over the English speaking world and Western Europe. Christadelphian aid to Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel is, of course, a part of their religious belief.

It started when first news arrived of the anti-Jewish riots in Russia, and the resulting rising wave of emigration from that country. In spite of their non-involvement in political events, they were more than alert to such events as might harbingers the coming of the promised Messiah. This is how they felt on reading Oliphant's reports from Russia and Roumania. They contributed modest sums, as befitted their economic situation, but the value of the pound was high and helped the Jewish immigrants considerably. After Oliphant's death, the nature and form of aid changed from time to time, but it continues to this day. The Christadelphians' intense interest in the fate of the Jews caused them to read every report with deep interest. In the April, 1882, issue of their magazine they quoted Oliphant, who was in Russia at the time, in detail (The Christadelphian April 1882, 183-5). The following month, along with long quotes from Oliphant's letters in The Times, they also wrote:

*In reply to our letter to Mr. Oliphant, in which we informed him of our contribution to the cause [of helping the Jews] and our request that he be the one to distribute these funds to the Jewish settlers in Palestine, we heard from him that he was ready to come to an agreement with us in this matter (The Christadelphian June 1882).*

Oliphant wrote to them from Lemberg (Lodz), in Galicia on April 1882:

*Although I have been instrumental in shipping off more than 200 starving creatures to America, my sympathies are all enlisted in their return to Palestine. I am in daily receipt of the most touching letters from all parts of Russia, informing me that the unanimous desire of all the Russian Jews is to return to the land of their fathers; that they are collecting money all over the country for the purpose; some of which they offer, like yourselves, to place in my hands; and that the idea of going to America is abhorrent to them. Committees are being formed in Vienna, here and in all the principal towns in*

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Roumania, for the very purpose of aiding this movement, the very existence of which is unknown in England, though, the moment I have time, I shall publish something in the papers on the subject. (The Christadelphian, June 1882, 275).

In another letter from Bucharest, on March, 1882, he suggests to the Brothers:

*I think it is advisable that persons desirous of contributing towards the colonization of Palestine by the Russian and Roumanian Jews, should suspend all pecuniary intervention until the intentions of the Turkish Government are clearly known on the subject. . . at present the desire on the part of the Jews amounts to an enthusiasm which it is difficult to restrain. . . . But Turkish objection could cause insurmountable difficulties (ibid.).*

He continued to describe the situation of the eastern European Jews and their suffering with the utmost sympathy, and bemoaned the dilemma, as he perceived it, that the Jews were caught between Russian hostility, on one hand, and Turkish intransigence, on the other. With the ground burning under their feet, America loomed as the immediate solution. He advised great care and planning for the future and believed that the time would soon be right to arouse the British public in support for Jewish settlement in Palestine.

*The Christadelphian*, not to be deterred, wrote: *The movement of the Jews to Palestine is a movement that doubtlessly deserves our sympathy. The yearning for the Holy Land is only quenched in Jews by the temptations of material prosperity. Palestine has been the ideal in all Jewish hearts since the Jews lost it. It is scarcely too much to say that the Return is beginning under our very eyes in the colonizing tendency of the Russian Jews. We cannot and will not refuse our heartiest help by personal exertion and pecuniary assistance to what may prove to be the commencement of one of the most impressive episodes in human history. (ibid., 279)*

In a further report in the magazine, which includes parts of a speech by Oliphant to the Hovevei Zion in Jassy, Roumania, there appears a list of contributions by notables of this society (opp. cit.). *Neuschatz, Pesner, Meirhofer and others gave a total of 60,000 francs, a sizeable sum. But Oliphant also announced — he had his ear to the ground — The agitation in favour of emigration to Palestine among the Jews of Russia and Roumania has perceptibly subsided during the last two months, partly in consequence of the increasing opposition of the Turkish Government, partly as the result the reports of deputations who have been sent to judge for themselves and, finally, because since the accession of Count Tolstoi the persecutions have relaxed. . . (ibid., 425)*

*In an article in a publication called 'The Nineteenth Century' and reprinted in The Christadelphian, Oliphant explained some of his views:*

Events are so culminating as to force upon Europe the necessity of recognizing in the Jewish race a force [with] which, if it remains much longer scattered among the nations, they will be unable to cope. Already the alternatives loom in the near future — either of race extinction by marriage in countries too civilized to attempt it by massacre, or of separation as a young nationality. . . They will not accept the fate thus thrust upon them, but emerging from the contempt and obscurity to which they have so long been condemned, will gather themselves from the nations, stimulated by new aspirations . . . and having given proof of their successful competition in the highest achievements. . . which will qualify them for national existence. . . they have won triumphs in art, in literature, in finance and even in statesmanship. . . In their own country they could achieve things not possible living amongst other peoples as at present. . .

*(The Christadelphian, Sept. 1882, 425-6)*

The Brothers informed Oliphant, in September, 1882, that they had collected the sum of £300 and a large quantity of clothing, the first of their contributions to the early settlers. In his reply of October 18, reprinted in *The Christadelphian* (Dec. 1882, 534-5), he explained to

them that he would be in Palestine in the near future, and would then assess developments, in order to suggest where to spend the money. He asked them what their thoughts on policy were, and suggested a variety of methods: to support existing villages by buying agricultural equipment, or settling new arrivals as protégés, who would then form a nucleus for a new village, or to hand the contributions over to the Syrian Colonisation Fund of Lord Shaftesbury. Oliphant also wished to know in whose name he was to give this assistance, adding that the name Christadelphian would perhaps not be regarded favourably. Roberts hastened to reply: ‘The Syrian Foundation’s aims extend beyond the boundaries of Biblical Israel, and it is also too closely identified with ideas of conversion. You might use the name *Birmingham and other Lovers of Israel*’ (*ibid.*, 535). *Oliphant did not support this idea. He pursued this matter no further, thus creating the impression that it was his own money and philanthropy. He continued, however, to discuss methods of using the funds, far more modest and limited than his ideas in his book The Land of Gilead (1880). He suggested buying land, building houses and renting them to farmers, thereby creating a fund for further settlements. Another alternative was establishing ‘protectorate’ villages. (These ideas preceded Baron Rothschild’s involvement in the country, when he employed exactly this system.) For this purpose, Oliphant entered into long and difficult negotiations to purchase land in Shfar-Am, reporting on many details to the Brothers and suggesting ideas as to possible identification with biblical sites. The Birmingham community was ecstatic. But the negotiations failed. Only then did Oliphant turn his attention to the troubled farmers of Rosh Pinna (Ja’uni) in Upper Galilee (The Christadelphian, Jan. 1884, 33). With each difficulty or failure, as reported to Roberts, he feared their disappointment with the way he handled their money. But they, who saw the Messiah at the gate, would not be deterred as long as he, Oliphant, their trusted and honoured messenger continued his, their, work. Their faith in him knew no bounds, he was as though sent by Heaven in order to help the Coming. He therefore continued to lobby the authorities and to ferret out any news or rumours which might have a bearing on his aims. He made no more mention of his financial sources, and this was probably the reason that none of his biographers knew about them (Oliphant 1878; Schneider 1942; Henderson 1956; Taylor 1982).*

He loaned and gave various sums to those he thought needy, reporting everything in great detail to the Brothers in Birmingham. Thus, he correctly gave the impression that he was saving people from hunger and preventing farms from being abandoned. It must be said that the sect’s contributions were not enormous. During the entire period of Oliphant’s connection with them, the total did not exceed £1000, much less than the sums collected during his tours of Eastern Europe and, of course, of no comparison with the untold sums invested by Rothschild. But much of their aid came before the Baron’s organization was operating fully, and so acted as a kind of bridge, enabling the settlers of Rosh Pinna and Zichron Yaakov to hold on during that crucial time. As an example, ‘The Russian Settlement’, a group of 5–6 families in Rosh Pinna, who had not joined the arrangements made by Rothschild for the settlers of Roumanian origin for several months, were regarded by the Christadelphians as ‘theirs’, until they, too, came under Rothschild’s protection. Oliphant also came to the assistance of Jewish farmers in Peqi’in, Beck’s enterprise on the Jermak, in Yesod Hama’ala and in B’ne Yehuda, on the Golan, by purchasing items of equipment for them that they could not afford (Ilan 1985, 69–79).

It is sad to see that, instead of the grand scheme that Oliphant had envisioned, of an integrated, all-encompassing settlement area in Gilead, he was forced to deal in small details for one farmer here, another farmer there. The reality was so much smaller than the dream. At the end of 1886 and beginning of 1887, Oliphant stayed in England. It was only then that he first met leading members of the Brotherhood. He was received with full honours, and talked with them about the situation in the Middle East and what was called the Eastern

Question, meaning the conflicting ambitions of Britain and Russia against the background of the weakening Ottoman Empire. For the first time, the idea of a direct presence in the country was raised. A member of the Brotherhood, who was an expert beekeeper and who insisted on remaining anonymous, volunteered to work amongst the settlers and instruct them in his trade. The idea was accepted and he did indeed make his way to Palestine. His reports were so positive that various additional ideas were put forward, to a point where commercial projects were mooted, all in the guise of experimental stations. The one which was finally adopted, in 1889, was the growing and processing of sugarcane. It was a total failure and effectively put an end to all assistance for agricultural initiatives. Since then the efforts of the Brotherhood have concentrated on the poor of Jerusalem and new immigrants. However, this occurred after Oliphant's death, at the end of 1888.

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