Dr. Ludwig Krapf (1810-1881)

First Protestant Missionary to East Africa

Johann Ludwig Krapf was born on January 11, 1810. He was the youngest of four children born to Katherina Maria and Johann Jakob Krapf. The Krapfs were a longstanding farming family in Derendingen, a small pietist community just south of the university town of Tübingen, in the State of Württemberg.

As a child young Ludwig developed a love for devotional reading and particularly the stories of the Old Testament. He started school at six years old, and although his family was financially comfortable, he would not have expected an education beyond the village school. A chance encounter, however, with a widow in Tübingen provided a unique opportunity for the farmer's son to go to grammar school, where he excelled and was soon top of his class. It was at this school, at fifteen years old, that Ludwig first heard the idea of foreign missions and was intrigued by the spread of Christianity among the heathen. Two years later, in 1827, he entered the Basel college to train for missionary work, and on February 6, 1837, he set out on the long and difficult journey to Ethiopia with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), a missionary organisation within the Evangelical wing of the Church of England.

Krapf arrived in Ethiopia in December 1837 when opposition from the Orthodox Church was developing against Protestant missions—soon all Protestant missionaries would be expelled. Krapf, however, had begun to develop a burden for the unreached tribes in the interior, the Oromo particularly, which he believed would be the gateway to the heart of Africa.[1] In 1842 Krapf travelled to Egypt to marry Fraülein Rosine Deitrich in Alexandria. On his return, he was forbidden to re-enter, and despite numerous attempts at different coastal entry points Krapf and his new wife were forced to quit Ethiopia. In the end, he set out around the Horn of Africa (Somalia) and down the Swahili Coast to Zanzibar. It was an innovative and ambitious step but having convinced the CMS of his strategy the committee formed the *East Africa Mission* and supported him as the first European to attempt the interior of Africa from the Muslim dominated East Coast.[2]

[1] The Oromo people were part of a major ethnic group in the southern part of Ethiopia and stretched into northern Kenya. Krapf hoped that through this tribe he could get access to the heart of Africa; "give us the [Oromo]," he said, "and Central Africa is ours."

[2] On January 2, 1851, at a valedictory service for Ludwig Krapf, Henry Venn, the Secretary and strategist of the CMS, said, "If Africa is to be penetrated by European missionaries, it must be from the east coast." Travellers had explored large parts of Africa from the north, south and west coasts, but nobody had attempted from the east coast, except Ludwig Krapf and his partner Johannes Rebmann. Later, Krapf's biographer and CMS historian, Eugene Stock, wrote, "Even Livingstone's more important journeys had scarcely begun, and it is a remarkable fact that the most famous and successful travellers since that time have almost all proven the truth of Mr. Venn's dictum, by starting on their journeys from the Zanzibar coast.

Dr. and Mrs. Krapf arrived at Zanzibar on January 3, 1844, and with an introductory letter from Said bin Sultan, the Muslim ruler, they set out for Mombasa. At first, the study of Swahili was a cause of great frustration, not having any written text from which to work and no grammar or dictionary. Ludwig made good progress, however, and by June 8, 1844, he was able to begin a translation of the book of Genesis. "I always considered that day," he wrote, "the most important day of my life."[3]

Very soon Krapf's success was overshadowed by tragedy. On July 6, Mrs. Krapf gave birth to a little girl, but the week following on July 13, Mrs. Krapf died and a few days later, the little girl also. This double bereavement was a hard blow to Dr. Krapf, "my heart and body wept for many days," he wrote, but rather than defeat, this turned out rather to reinforce his missionary resolve. He wrote home to his mission,

> "Tell the committee that in East Africa there is the lonely grave of one member of the mission connected with your society. This is an indication that you have begun the conflict in this part of the world; and since the conquests of the Church are won over the graves of many of its members, you may be all the more assured that the time has come when you are called to work for the conversion of Africa. Think not of the victims who in this glorious warfare may suffer or fall; only press forward until East and West Africa are united in Christ."

Ludwig was soon back at his desk, "persecuting with great zeal the study of the Swahili language," travelling the coast and seeking out a suitable place for a mission station on the mainland. On August 19, 1844, he made his first trek to the hills of Rabai, in the Mijikenda country, and on January 1, 1845, he set out to make acquaintance with the Wakamba people.

On June 10, 1846, Johannes Rebmann arrived and Krapf and his new colleague began to build a more permanent mission station. They lived a simple lifestyle, but the completion of the permanent house was an important milestone in Krapf's missionary career. The solid structure built with their own hands was a sign that Christianity had begun in East Africa and that he had secured a position from where "the unexplored regions of the interior can be reached, and the ancient bulwarks of Satan assailed by the messengers of Christ." In the three years between September 1847 and September 1850, Dr. Krapf and Rev. Rebmann made six significant journeys into three areas hoping to reach Unyamwezi—a strategic trading region. Krapf made one journey to Usambara towards the southwest and one journey

---

Livingstone, Burton, Speke, Grant, Ven der Decken, as well as other more recent explorers, all travelled from east to west; and from east to west both Cameron and Stanley made their great marches 'across Africa.'"

[3] Swahili is a Muslim-Bantu community which dominates East Africa. It was an oral community and the language, properly known as Kiswahili had few written texts in 1844 when Ludwig Krapf arrived. What texts they had, were written in Arabic script. Today Kiswahili is the lingua franca of the East African Community, spoken by millions, and is written in Roman script. This has been a huge benefit to the spread of the gospel in that region and this, under God, is thanks to Ludwig Krapf. If Said bin Sultan, the Islamic ruler of the Swahili Coast, had known the power that Krapf possessed in the Gospel of Christ, he most likely would never have written that letter recommending Krapf to the tribes of East Africa."

northwest to Ukambani. Rebmann made four journeys west to Teita and then beyond Teita to the Chagga region, at the base of Kilimanjaro.

Rebmann's first excursion in September 1847, was a huge success, and on that trip, he was the first European to see the white caps of Mt. Kilimanjaro and to testify of snow on the equator. His next two trips became increasingly promising, moving deeper each time into the interior. However, on the fourth trip, Rebmann was robbed and left to die in the wilderness. This experience was a devastating blow to Rebmann, having made so much progress and come so close to opening a way to the interior.

On September 18, 1849, Krapf began preparing for a journey north-west of Mombasa to Ukambani. He was the first European to see the snow-caps of Mt. Kenya. His first journey was a success, and he became friendly with Kivoi, the Chief of Kitui. A few years later, July 11, 1851, Krapf set out on his second trip to Ukambani, intending to establish a base, and from there to venture further inland. Krapf's account of this journey fills over fifty pages in his *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours* published in 1860. Along the way, heading north-west towards the Tana river and Mt. Kenya, Krapf and his party, along with Kivoi were attacked by a hostile tribe. Chief Kivoi was killed in the chaos, the party was scattered and Krapf was left alone in the wilderness. News on the "bush telegraph" reached Rabai that Krapf had been killed. On September 30, however, he made it back to Rabai emotionally and physically exhausted, having escaped with his life.

Initial attempts to penetrate Africa from the East Coast had proved difficult—Chagga was closed, and Ukambani also. Usambara to the south remained the only route that promised anything. On February 10, 1852, Krapf set out again for Usambara, but with opposition from the Arabs on the coast, this also came to nothing. All three proposed routes were now closed, Chagga, Ukambani, and Usambara, which gave pause to the missionaries at Rabai. Krapf remained at Rabai, for another eighteen months, engaged in the daily ministry of the mission, attempting still to reach out beyond their own station, and hoping for more reinforcements from Europe—but they did not come. In the new year of 1854, he visited the Committee in London to discuss plans for the future of the mission. Despite the setbacks, the Committee had not lost confidence in Krapf's idea and was developing a plan to appoint another missionary to return with Krapf. However, Krapf was struggling with the realisation that his health was breaking. On his return to the mission, he wrote,

> On my arrival at Cairo, it became clear to me that I could not go on to Rabbai in this suffering condition, nor indeed any longer endure the climate of Africa or present way of life, and that therefore my work in Africa was at an end.

Krapf had identified only one convert. His own words reveal something of the pathos of the decision he had to make and yet the resolve he had in spite of so little tangible fruit. "I bade farewell," he wrote, "to the land where I had suffered so much, journeyed so much and experienced so many proofs of the protecting and sustaining hand of God." At the end of

1855, Dr. Krapf was forced to concede the heart of Africa to those who would follow. It was a big blow to the CMS, not only their operation in East Africa but also the loss of one of their most gifted and noted missionaries. He was forty-five years old.

While the remaining years of his life may have been less remarkable, they certainly were no less productive, as he continued his linguistic work and transitioned into the role of a missionary statesman. His health may have been "shattered," as he said, but his spirit was undaunted and his missionary purpose undiminished. He was now entering into a period of international missionary influence and leadership. At least four missionary organisations were directly influenced or assisted by Dr. Krapf in the years that lay ahead. In Germany, for example, among his many other influences, Krapf's work led directly to the establishment of the Hermannsburg Mission. This mission was established in 1849 and followed Krapf's initial concept of getting to the Oromo people. In Sweden also, the Swedish Evangelical Missionary Society was founded as a direct result of Krapf's work and began missionary labours in East Africa. Two other missions in which Dr. Krapf was practically involved were the Pilgrim's Mission with Mr. Spittler and "The Apostle's Way." Then in 1861, he accompanied Rev. Thomas Wakefield to Kenya where he helped to establish the United Methodist Free Church Mission in Ribe, not far from Rabai.

The greatest work of Dr. Krapf's "retirement years," however, was not his missionary journeys or the advice and assistance to other organisations, but his linguistic work. Ludwig Krapf was responsible for over two dozen dictionaries and translations. He had described himself as a "teacher … a book man" and as the preacher in Ecclesiastes (12:9-10), Krapf gave the people "words … even words of truth." His linguistic gifts are perhaps his most enduring legacy.

On November 26, 1881, Dr. Krapf spent the afternoon with his friend Martin Flad. The greater part of the conversation focused on the second coming of our Lord Jesus. At one point in the conversation, Krapf commented:

> "I am so penetrated by the feeling of the nearness of the Lord's coming that I cannot describe it. He is indeed near; Oh! we ought to redeem the time and hold ourselves in readiness, so that we may be able to say with a good conscience, Yea, come, Lord Jesus, as it will be glorious when our Saviour appears as a conqueror, and His enemies have become His footstool."

The following morning, his family found him undressed for bed and kneeling by his bedside in prayer. He was buried in Kornthal beside his old friend Rebmann, and reports say that there were many hundreds at his funeral; one report claims as many as three thousand.

Dr. Krapf was not preoccupied with his own story or personal success but with the Kingdom of God. In a letter dated, August 30, 1881, just three months before he died, Dr. Krapf wrote a lengthy letter to the Committee of the CMS, giving, "a masterly summary of the languages

and dialects spoken on the East Coast from Tigray to Cape Delgado." The final paragraphs of that letter sum up the passion of Ludwig Krapf for linguistic and literary work in Africa, his far-sighted vision for the Kingdom of God, and the persistent and unconquerable spirit that enabled him to fulfil his calling—even to death.

> "There is still much to do in East Africa, but I trust that in ten or twenty years, in God's providence, an extensive literature will be found for the promotion of Christianity … Real missionaries and their friends must never be discouraged at whatever appearance things may assume from without. They must act like a wise general does. When he is beaten back on one point, he attacks the enemy from another point, according to the plan he has previously laid out. And in all cases true missionaries and their friends must be mindful of the memorable words which were spoken by the French guard at the Battle of Watterloo: "*La garde meurt mais ne se rend pas*"—"the guard dies, but does not surrender."

Aaron Dunlop *is the founding Director of The Krapf Project. Aaron has previously pastored in Jamaica, and in Victoria, BC., Canada for ten years. After two years in rural Kenya (2018-2020), Aaron returned to the UK to establish The Krapf Project to gather recourses to pastors in rural East Africa. He has recently authored a biography of Dr. Ludwig Krapf, the first Protestant missionary to East Africa, with Joshua Press, Canada. Aaron is the editor of The Pastor's Study, a quarterly magazine distributed in East Africa. Aaron is married to Grace, and they have five children.*