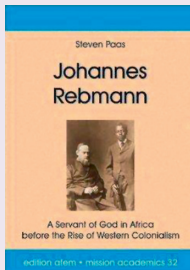


Conflicting personalities and driving ambition

Book Title:

Johannes Rebmann, a servant of God in Africa before the rise of western colonialism

Book Cover:

Author:

Steven Paas

ISBN:

978-3-86269-029-9 (VKW)

Publisher:

VTR Publications, Nürnberg, 2011, \$27.71*

*Book price at time of review

Review Title:

Conflicting personalities and driving ambition

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Even though the concept of *mission* seems to be in the ebb of theological and denominational attention, it nevertheless still awakens a vague vision of faithful gospel ministry in exotic places. This may easily apply to the evangelical pietist, Johannes Rebmann (1820–1876) who served for 29 years as a missionary in East Africa and kept a diary until his death. This was before the colonial scramble to claim and divide Africa politically and when slave trading on the East Coast of Africa was big business. Many geographers of the day disputed Rebmann's claim to see snow on a mountain on the equator. He had, however, discovered Kilimanjaro and together with Johann Ludwig Krapf, also Mount Kenya. Rebmann's story is thoroughly researched by Steven Paas, a former missionary and lecturer at Zomba Theological College in Malawi.

What did Rebmann have to show for his labour? Just a 'modest visible harvest' (p. 215), birthed amidst immense personal sacrifice in the Mombasa area. Marriage arrangements with his wife, Emma, were made through correspondence, and their lives together told the story of a great exercise of patience and faith in God. Interestingly enough, they lacked enthusiasm at welcoming visitors – they preferred to labour on without distraction (pp. 80–81). This story is, however, inextricably linked to the divergent personalities of Rebmann and his fellow-missionary, Krapf. His delight in serving with fellow German, Johann Krapf, in time waned due to irreconcilable differences, painstakingly documented by Paas.

Divergent views of how to evangelise the interior arose. Rebmann was convinced that before venturing into Africa, the proper groundwork in preparation for that ministry had to be laid. 'Lack of preparation leads to failure' (p. 98), a dictum Krapf did not seem to grasp or appreciate. To that end Rebmann, convinced that mission and linguistics are intertwined (p. 151), spent years compiling words from different languages laying the foundations of lexicography. From these labour emerged the Chichewa (Kiniasa) dictionary (p. 7); remarkably, this is a language spoken in the Malawi, Zambia, and Mocambique region, hundreds of kilometres from Mombasa, by some captured slaves in Mombasa. Glaring socio-political obstacles such as slavery, magic and poverty had to be addressed first, he was convinced, otherwise the Christian faith would be seen to condone, or seem to lack sufficient answers to address these matters (pp. 70, 95, 115). Krapf was all for venturing into the interior, critical of the slow pace set by Rebmann. To name some examples: Rebmann favoured a probation of about two to three years before finally baptising converts of the small growing congregation (pp. 84, 95–96) at Kisuludini. Paas makes the breath-taking discovery that '[t]he shaping of this congregation ... was the foundation of the Church in East Africa' (p. 114). Rebmann favoured permanent buildings to temporary cheap structures contradicting the general opinion expressed by other missionaries. Local chiefs became convinced of his integrity and began to appreciate that the reason missionaries remain in their areas is to teach 'the book' (p. 88). Rebmann was not convinced that all mission societies were Christian (evangelical) (p. 100), and for that reason was sometimes critical and hesitant to welcome offers of cooperation. It seems that he was unaware of the influence of Krapf's visits to Europe, the impact of the publication of his travel journals, and meetings with influential church leaders. But the negative press eventually began to filter through to Rebmann: the Christian community saw him as eclipsed by Krapf, as a missionary who 'failed to succeed' and whose work had reached spiritual stagnation (p. 118). Paas, however, suggests an alternate interpretation to this so-called *eclipse*: though Krapf's personal ventures into the African continent from the coast by and large proved to be failures, his dramatic accounts of events and charismatic personality, supplemented by regular visits to the continent drummed up support for his views. Krapf's views held sway, not his missionary successes.

By 1875 Rebmann was almost blind and worn-out. Accompanied by his faithful friend Isaac Nyondo, he arrived back in Gerlingen, Germany. There Krapf again entered into his life. Krapf

How to cite this book review: Potgieter, R., 2015, 'Conflicting personalities and driving ambition', *In die Skriflig* 49(1), Art. #1949, 2 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i1.1949>

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brokered a marriage with Luise Däuble in 1876 for Rebmann and gained the blind man's trust. Rebmann died at the age of 56 years in 1876.

Krapf seems to have had almost unlimited access to Rebmann's manuscripts and here Paas really comes into his own. Paas takes exception to the unfair treatment Rebmann suffered at the hand of the ambitious Krapf, however well-intentioned (p. 152ff.). He challenges the usual perceptions of both Rebmann's and Krapf's actual accomplishments. Paas' own work as editor of the Chichewa/Chinyanja Dictionary confirmed that the sources of its vocabulary showed that Krapf chose to use many of Rebmann's lists of words and their meanings (p. 145ff.). Paas showed that Krapf 'took the liberty of cutting deep into the lifework of his blind friend' (p. 146) and often neglected to give Rebmann due credit.

Although advertised as a biography the buyer or reader gets far more. This is a thoroughly researched book, dealing with personages and the politics and cultural tensions of the day. It is also a persuasive discourse of the influence of linguistics in missionary endeavour and of the enduring value of academic labour of the past. Paas' occasional bias towards Rebmann is also probably accounted for by the passion that he has for linguistics and of the immense worth he ascribes to Rebmann's work. Finally, the book also serves as a warning to Christian workers about the debilitating forces brought about by conflicting personalities and the dangers of ambition. Steven Paas has done the Christian church and missiology a service in giving us this painstakingly researched account of Johannes Rebmann.

A minor typing error occurs on p. 89 – 1959 should read, 1859.