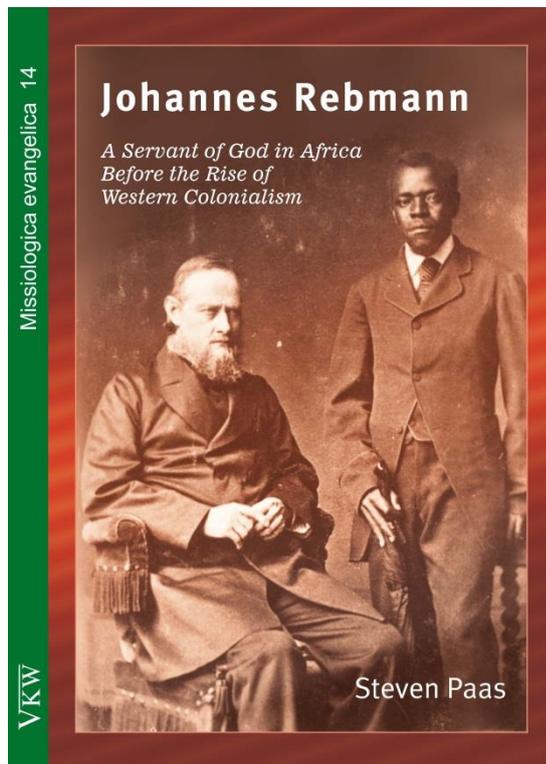


Review article by Dr. Linda S. Gottschalk, in: *European Journal of Theology*, 28-2 (2019), p.194-196



Johannes Rebmann: A Servant of God in Africa Before the Rise of Western Colonialism (second edn) *Missiologica Evangelica* 14, Steven Paas
Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2018; 333 pp., € 19,80, pb., ISBN 978-3-86269-152-4

SUMMARY

Johannes Rebmann, the first European to set eyes on Mount Kilimanjaro, served as a pioneer missionary in East Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, commissioned by the Anglican Church Missionary Society. Lexicography was his main occupation, but he faced several serious challenges: theological and methodological differences with his closest colleague, colonialism and slavery, and personal health problems. The author of this book has himself served in Malawi and participated in the recent English-Chichewa dictionary. Paas uses an impressive number of primary sources, letters and archival materials to paint the picture of Rebmann, his life and work.

RÉSUMÉ

Johannes Rebmann, le premier européen à avoir contemplé le Kilimandjaro, a été un missionnaire pionnier en Afrique de l'Est au milieu du dix-neuvième siècle, envoyé par la société missionnaire de l'Église anglicane. Il s'est principalement consacré à un travail lexicographique, mais il a dû faire face à diverses difficultés sérieuses : des différences d'ordre théologique et méthodologique avec ses plus proches collègues, le colonialisme et l'esclavage, ainsi que des problèmes de santé. L'auteur de cet ouvrage a lui-même servi au Malawi et a participé à l'élaboration du récent dictionnaire Anglais-Chichewa. Paas a consulté un nombre impressionnant de sources de première main, de

lettres et d'archives pour dresser le portrait de Rebmann et présenter sa vie et son œuvre.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Johannes Rebmann, der erste Europäer der jemals den Kilimandscharo erblickt hatte, diente in der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts als Pioniermissionar in Ostafrika; er war ausgesandt von der Missionsgesellschaft der anglikanischen Kirche. Seine Hauptbeschäftigung war die Lexikographie, aber darüber hinaus wurde er mit diversen ernstlichen Herausforderungen konfrontiert: Es gab Unstimmigkeiten zwischen ihm und seinem engsten Mitarbeiter über theologische Ansätze und die Methodik ihrer Arbeit, er befand sich in einem Umfeld von Kolonialismus und Sklaverei, und er geriet persönlich in gesundheitliche Schwierigkeiten. Der Autor dieses Buches hat selbst in Malawi Dienst getan und an dem unlängst erschienenen Wörterbuch auf Englisch-Chichewa mitgearbeitet. Paas verwendet eine bemerkenswerte Zahl an Primärquellen, Briefen und Archivmaterial, um ein Bild von Rebmann, seinem Leben und Werk zu zeichnen.

‘I didn’t come here to make geographical discoveries, but to uncover the release and the salvation in Jesus Christ for the people who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.’ (230) With these words, missionary Johannes Rebmann downplayed the distinction of being the first European to have set eyes on Mount Kilimanjaro (which he was and which is the most that many know about him) and affirmed the real purpose for which he felt called to Africa. Dr Steven Paas, in this biography/monograph, champions the German missionary Rebmann as being of great importance to the spreading of the Gospel and the building of the Church in East Africa.

Rebmann was born in Gerlingen near Stuttgart in 1820, studied at the Basler Mission Seminary, and went out under the English Church Mission Society. Originally a German Lutheran, he attended the Swiss non-denominational seminary and was ordained an Anglican priest in a time of notable mission cooperation, before the height of colonialism. He arrived in Mombasa in 1846 to work with Johann Ludwig Krapf, already on the field. During the four-month voyage Rebmann had studied Swahili diligently from notes Krapf had sent him. This industry foreshadows the immense contributions he would eventually make in lexicography: compiling word lists and making dictionaries in Swahili, N(y)ika and Kinyasa/ Chichewa/ Chinyanja. His work was crucial for those following him and his witness and efforts helped the start of some of the first churches in the Mombasa area.

Dr Steven Paas is no stranger to Africa himself as for a time he served as lecturer at Zomba Theological College in Malawi. He has published on Christianity in Africa and has been involved in the English – Chichewa dictionary project which recently appeared. Paas originally published his

biography of Rebmann in 2011. He has now updated and expanded the initial work for this second edition, adding approximately 50 pages and, according to the preface, improving some writing infelicities. A German-language edition of the work also appeared, priced at € 23,00 (ISBN 978-3-86269-163-0).

Paas describes Rebmann's life amid the themes of pioneer missionary work, the challenges of relationships between missionaries, slavery, lexicographical work, and rising colonialism. He has used an impressive number of primary sources, especially archival letters and manuscripts of Rebmann and his contemporaries and family. One interesting aspect is that of Rebmann's relationship with Krapf, who differed in theology and methodology with him. The two had a turbulent time as colleagues on the field. Rebmann stemmed from a classical 'old' Pietism, whereas Krapf was a Hahnist, a representative of a universalist strain of Pietism. Krapf had a vision of a string of mission stations, named after the apostles, which would extend from Egypt into the African interior. Rebmann, on the other hand, thought it most important to solidify the mission and the church on the coast first, building stronger buildings and devoting time to the languages, which seemed to Krapf to be the safer or less spiritual way. Years later, Krapf had returned to Germany as Rebmann laboured on despite the death of his wife, the dangers of Islamic slave traders and tribal conflicts, and his own declining health. When Rebmann, almost blind and with only his manuscripts, arrived back in Europe, Krapf took control by suggesting a second wife for him and taking over the editing of his work. This was not entirely pleasant for the weakened Rebmann, and the results of Krapf's decisions have caused controversy among lexicographers.

The book is, therefore, both a biography of Rebmann and a monograph with sections on the historical context of Pietism, inter-mission cooperation, slavery and rising colonialism. After an introduction which addresses the *status quaestionis* of Rebmann studies, Pietism is discussed. Rebmann's biography and the story of his work and that of his fellow missionaries are detailed in chapters 3-8. Chapters 9-12 focus on Rebmann as language worker, as someone confronted with Muslim slavery (and slaves who helped Rebmann with his language work), as missionary, and as herald of a new missionary era during high colonialism. At the end of each chapter are portraits of people mentioned, small maps, and paintings and photographs of various locations. There are also two appendices: one detailing the information given by the former Malawian slave Salimini about the Chichewa language (by Andrew Goodson) and one on the history of Chichewa lexicography (a revision of an article by Paas).

The humanising stories about Rebmann from Krapf's letters in chapter 11 (Rebmann's patience, kindness in making soup for Krapf when he was ill, mending broken chairs and playing the clarinet) would have been nice to read earlier in the biographical section to give us a rounded picture of the personality of Rebmann. Placed as they are, they are a bright spot for one who reads that far.

All in all, the book illuminates the life and importance of Johannes Rebmann, is well-researched, and comes from a place of deep belief in the work that Rebmann did, both as lexicographer and as missionary.

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