

Another Perspective

Mormonen—die Heiligen der letzten Zeit? [*Mormons—Saints of the Latter Times?*] by David Trobisch (D-Neukirchen-Vluyn: Friedrich Bahn Verlag, Reihe Apologetische Themen 11, 1998), 121 pp. DM 24,80.

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WHEN ONE REVIEWS A BOOK on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a language other than English—regardless of the content of the book—the question of the significance of non-English books about Mormonism becomes an issue. How accessible is such a book to most scholars or even casual readers about Mormonism? This is particularly acute in the case of a book in German. There are, after all, only a few tens of thousands of German-speaking LDS who might be interested in the book and far fewer who might be guided to it by an English language review, whereas for a book like *Mormon America*, there are millions of potential readers.

This particular and somewhat older book, however, is of importance to Mormon scholarship over and above the issue of language access, for a couple of reasons:

1. German is an important world language, particularly in the field of religious studies (Schol-

ars from Hugh Nibley to Daniel Peterson would have found themselves very limited in ancient religious research without the ability to read German.), and Germans have had a fascination with Mormonism ever since sociologist Max Weber mentioned it at the turn of the century. We should know what is being written about us in the German language.

2. The most important reason, however, is that as the church continues to expand internationally (proportionally speaking more growth is occurring off-continent now than within the USA and Canada) scholarship by Mormon scholars or on the topic of Mormonism will become increasingly non-English. Non-English scholarship will likely never predominate, given English’s status as an international language, but this doesn’t negate the growing importance of non-English resources and perceptions.

The history of books about Mormonism in the German language is not a pretty one. Sensationalism and astounding levels of misinformation and fear have long relegated Mormonism to the status of a “Sekte” (literally “sect”, but emotionally the equivalent of a “cult” in English), part of “those crazy Americans,” and the polygamous wasteland of Utah takes its place along with cowboys and Indians, cop shows, Hollywood sitcoms, and Senate hearings in the kalaidascope of what Germans envision as American pop-culture. With the appearance of David Trobisch’s study, however, there ap-

pears to be a break with this traditional tabloid outlook on Mormonism.

Although he is native German, Trobisch is currently Professor of New Testament at Bangor Theological Seminary in Bangor, Maine. His unique position, geographically in the US but culturally with a foot in two worlds, has prepared him to write a book about Mormonism based on considerable primary research in Salt Lake City and Independence (among other places), but refreshingly, his credits also include names which will be immediately familiar to any German Latter-day Saint who is active on the Internet; names like René Krywult of Vienna, Markus Gappmaier, another Austrian member, Gunar Werner, an ex-LDS from Leipzig, and so on.

That brings up another intriguing development represented by this book: its partial integration into the internet. Not only was much of the research for this book done on the Internet (I personally saw many of the questions Prof. Trobisch posted on HLT-Liste, an email discussion group, or “listserv” for German-speakers interested in Mormonism), but many Internet resources are given in the book—or were meant to be. Alas, my one major complaint about the physical book itself is that an intended exhaustive appendix on LDS resources, a sort of German equivalent of LauraMaery Gold’s *Mormons on the Internet* was inadvertently left out by the publisher.

Interestingly, a search on Amazon.com’s German site, Amazon.de, for books about “Mormonen” turned up three books², Trobisch’s and two others. One can imagine the approach taken by the author of one of these volumes, Rüdiger Hauth, from the titles of his other books on religion: *Witches, Gurus and Soul-snatchers: A Small Cate-*

chism of Cults, Compact Lexikon of Religions, and Besides the Churches [these and all other translations by the reviewer]—all too typical of the traditionally sensationalist approach referred to already. Of the three books, only Trobisch’s book has any “on-line” readers’ reviews. At this writing there are two, and both are positive, evidently written by LDS who are pleased and relieved that someone is finally taking Mormonism seriously.

Trobisch’s commitment to rigorous research, as well as his sense of fairness, comes through from beginning to end. The book covers the history of Mormonism, including a brief overview of the church (LDS and RLDS) in German-speaking lands, but has a very good short review of other Restorationist organizations as well (better, in fact, than I’ve seen in any English book of its size). He also gives a brief history of the printing of the Book of Mormon which is, again, better than anything I’ve ever read in English. He addresses controversial issues like archaeological support for the Book of Mormon (Trobisch isn’t particularly impressed by the apologetics done to date by FARMS and similar organizations) and temple work. He approaches the latter topic objectively but sympathetically:

“For members of the LDS church, visiting the temple and participating in certain temple rituals have great importance. Whereas the weekly Sunday services are held in public, outsiders are not permitted entry to the temple or to the activities therein. The rituals themselves are kept secret. Even members of the organization only experience the details once they have set foot in the temple; there are no printed instructions for

this. These rituals are essentially sacred [‘heilsnotwendig’] and can also be performed on behalf of others....These doctrines proceed from the assumption that every person can spiritually develop him or herself, even up to achieving the status of a divine creator.”

After mentioning that the RLDS do not treat the temple in the same way, he points out that the temple ceremonies are secret. (He explains that unauthorized transcripts are readily available, but the internet reference he intended to provide for this was, as mentioned, omitted through a publisher’s error.) Specifically regarding the Endowment, for which he uses the borrowed English word “das Endowment” rather than the orthodox German LDS word “die Begabung,” he writes:

“At the first visit to the temple, the member receives a ceremonial, spiritual blessing. This ceremony is referred to as ‘Endowment’ and is repeated during ongoing visits. There is little concrete about this practice in the Book of Mormon or other revealed scriptures about this blessing. Details are always changed and advantage has been taken of the potential offered by new audiovisual media.”

Whereas many reviewers tend to become bogged down in the detail of the ritual itself, Trobisch, gives a brief description and resists the temptation to speculate too much on cultic aspects, other than mentioning possible links to Masonic ritual. Then he goes on to explain the meaning of the endowment to Latter-day Saints:

“...candidates are taught ethical principles which arise out of the ordinances of the gospel and the belief in a

divine creation, as this has been given expression in the inspired translation of passages from Genesis, by Joseph Smith. . . . [Role playing and symbolic rites] serve as practice and preparation for the divine Final Judgement, when, according to the beliefs of the LDS, this ritual will be repeated.

Other topics which are well-handled, in the same remarkably spare but thorough manner, are the “Book of Abraham” (where he discusses what it means to be a “translator”), the Kinderhook plates, and the Joseph Smith translation, all within the context of one of the most singular LDS beliefs: that of an open canon. The author’s approach to Mormonism in this book is historically and doctrinally accurate, but also fair—even sympathetic. He rounds out the book with interviews with “real Mormons”, or “Begegnungen” as he calls these interactions in German. These are personal experiences in places sacred to the restored church and with church members he’s met, both in person and on the Internet. In the conclusion, we get as close a personal insight into Mormonism as a sympathetic Protestant seminarian could possibly be expected to give:

“We have arrived at the end of a journey. What impressions remain. . . ? Joseph Smith himself remains a puzzle. The literary representations all too often just reflect back the personality and convictions of whoever wrote the descriptions of him. He appears variously as a charlatan, heretic, womanizer, puritan, Free Mason, reformer, or saint. I have become firmly convinced that one can best interpret Joseph Smith’s revelations—independent of their meaning—as subjective experiencings of God [*Gotteseerfahrungen*], which

are really not unusual in the context of religious phenomena. When Joseph Smith speaks of appearances or voices, he has, in fact, seen and heard that which he reports. How it all fit together, even he didn't always understand. In the year of his death, Joseph

Smith wrote the following about himself: 'I make no demands of anyone who does not believe my history. If I hadn't experienced myself what I have experienced, I wouldn't believe it myself.'"