

Reid L. Neilson. *Early Mormon Missionary Activities
in Japan, 1901–1924.*

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Reviewed by R. Lanier Britsch

Reid L. Neilson, PhD, the managing director of the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is well known among LDS Asian and Pacific scholars as a gifted and productive editor and bibliographer. His research and writing on the history of the Church in Japan is informative, enlightening, and enriching. Although the topic of missionary work in Japan has been written about by other authors, Neilson's book adds much to what has already been written.

In *Early Mormon Missionary Activities in Japan, 1901–1924*, Neilson has created one of the few LDS books dealing with Mormon missiology. Protestants and Catholics use the word *missiology* to mean a discipline that combines theology, sociology, history, linguistics, and a smattering of other social science approaches. LDS missiology, on the other hand, has been limited primarily to history and Church history taken to a high, analytical level.

The preface is crucial for readers to understand Neilson's purpose in writing. Neilson touches on several issues that others have not ventured to put on paper. For example, on page x, after introducing the impressive extent of current LDS missionary numbers worldwide, Neilson suggests, "One could argue that Mormon mission history *is* American mission history." This is a very bold assertion and its context has at least two aspects. First, Neilson points out that Catholic and Protestant mission historians have often avoided making reference to the Mormon missionary presence throughout the world. Neilson says, "LDS missionary work is the elephant in the mission studies room that is apparent to all but discussed by few," and explains that one reason the story of Mormon missions is rarely included with other Christian missionary histories is because Latter-day Saints are often considered "marginal" Christians or non-Christians. Many do not acknowledge Mormon missionaries and their history as legitimate Christian history. A second reason for the omission of LDS mission history is the failure of LDS scholars to write in the greater context of worldwide

Christian missionary activity. Neilson quotes David J. Whittaker's lament: "Seldom has the study of Latter-day Saint missionary work been put into a broader historical or cultural context." Neilson hopes to start bridging the chasm by laying some planks of historical understanding.

In Part 1, Neilson provides his readers with background regarding the thinking of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mormon leaders concerning Asian religions (chapter 1), discusses the first LDS missionary interactions with Asian peoples (chapter 2), and explains the standard Mormon missionary approach in Europe and America (chapter 3).

The first chapter, "Mormon Mappings of Asian Religions," is of special interest to those studying comparative religions. This chapter gives a clear survey of some Protestant and Mormon explanations of how and where the non-Christian religions fit on their eternal truth and salvation scales. The sum total of the discussion is that Mormons have found it easy to be generous and tolerant with all great religions and religious teachers because they believe that the light and spirit of Christ is among all people; they believe that Adam had basic truths regarding Christ's Atonement from the beginning, and those truths have diffused throughout the nations over time. Hence, Latter-day Saints generally respect the inspiration received by religious leaders throughout Asia.

Chapter 2, "Mormon Encounters with Asians," covers a good deal of territory in a few pages. Neilson almost covers the history of missions in a paragraph or two. But the rest of the sections give a serviceable introduction to the initial interchanges of Mormon leaders and missionaries with the peoples of Asia.

In chapter 3, "Euro-American Mormon Missionary Model," Neilson delves into the communication issues that have faced missionaries since the time of Saint Paul. He provides a useful discussion of missiological terminology and discusses the general lack of precision that surrounds any analysis of the "how to's" of bridging the gaps from culture to culture. Until the post-World War II era, Mormon missionaries almost exclusively taught their message to people with a biblical background. Neilson explains how a missionary can communicate effectively with someone who shares no or few religious beliefs or cultural mores. After taking his readers on a tour of the jargon words of evangelism used by missiologists (as in *globalization*, *internationalization*, *localization*, *contextualization*, *incarnation*, and so forth), Neilson devotes most of chapter 3 to a comparison of the Mormon and Protestant missionary systems during the nineteenth century, showing that the contrast between the American Protestant missionary system and that of the Mormons was vast.

He then explains that early Mormon missions (1830 to 1850s) were highly unstructured, often brief, and quite unsystematic. "This corps of

nonprofessional missionaries preached wherever they could get a hearing,” Neilson writes. “Mormon missionaries typically worked through their existing social networks, approaching family and friends, with whom they already had a tie and, therefore, a better chance of being successful” (41). By the 1850s, mission calls had become more formal. Elders of the Church were sent to specific places for extended periods of time. The first LDS missionaries to Asia, specifically China, India, and Siam, received definite appointments and were to remain at their posts until released.

The final part of chapter 3 presents a case study of one of the first Mormon encounters with a non-Christian, non-Euro-American part of the world—China, specifically Hong Kong, in 1852–53. Neilson says the China mission of 1852 (which did not actually begin until 1853) was an Asian first (although India was officially opened on Christmas day, 1851). Neilson points out that the Mormon elders had no training as gospel teachers or as linguists, they were totally without financial support, and their ability to teach depended almost entirely on their ability to communicate in Chinese. The elders were very much “strangers in a strange land,” as they themselves wrote to Church headquarters. “While the contemporaneous Taiping Rebellion and the harsh tropical climate contributed to their despondency,” Neilson summarized, “it was the missionaries’ inability to localize traditional [Mormon] missionary practices that truly led to their retreat [from Hong Kong]” (56).

In Part 2, Neilson starts by giving some narrative history in chapter 4 of the early Japan mission between 1901 and 1924. This includes the only narrative section in Neilson’s work. Perhaps he did not include more narrative because other historians have already told the story. Nevertheless, readers who are unacquainted with the broader outlines of the mission would benefit from knowing more of the story. The book would also have benefited from a deeper discussion of the history of Japanese religious law during the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taisho (1912–26) periods.

Chapters 5 and 6, “Mormon Missionary Practices in Japan” and “Temporary Retreat from Japan” respectively, provide the deepest analysis of how Mormon missionaries did their work in Japan and why the mission was closed. These chapters are Neilson’s finest missiological contribution, explaining how the Church was not really prepared numerically, financially, or culturally to do a successful job of planting itself in a “strange land.”

Early in chapter 5, Neilson states: “From the day they arrived in Japan until the day they returned to America, these men and women were unsure how to evangelize in a non-Christian, non-Western nation” (83). He writes further:

While the Protestants emphasized spiritual and secular education first, social welfare activities second, and Christian literature third, the Mormons’

focus was quite different: they stressed personal contacting first, Christian literature second, spiritual and secular education third, and social welfare activities last. . . . Protestants advanced Christ and culture, while the Mormons underscored primarily proselyting activities, according to the Euro-American missionary model. (84)

After briefly discussing the Protestant missionary approach, Neilson provides a breakdown of exactly how Mormon missionaries in Japan did their work. Chapter 5 highlights aspects of the older LDS missionary system and clearly shows that the missionaries never learned how to artfully adapt their message to the place and culture in which they labored, as evidenced by the chapter's subheadings: Tracting, Street Meetings, Magic Lantern Lectures, Sporting Activities, Christian Literature, Missionary Tracts, English Language Texts, Hymnals, Sunday Schools, and so forth.

"President Grant finally decided to take his church's only Asian mission off ecclesiastical life support in 1924" (120). So begins chapter 6 and Neilson's analysis of why the mission failed and had to be closed, including reasons such as language barriers, cultural differences, few convert baptisms, and feelings of defeat. Furthermore, "international problems, such as the Japanese exclusion laws that were passed in the United States, the near-closing of the Tonga Mission at approximately the same time, the failure to acquire any real property, and the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923 all flared up during the final years of the mission" (121).

To these suggested causes for the closure of the mission, Neilson offers additional interpretations. He suggests that the failure of the mission was "largely the byproduct of its leaders and missionaries imposing or translating their gospel message to the Japanese, in keeping with the traditional Mormon evangelistic practices" (121). Overall, the missionaries did not try to adapt their message to the culture of Japan. In this section, as in others, Neilson again provides useful interpretive material to justify his case.

Some readers may quibble with some of Neilson's interpretations, but in the long run, this book will be of real value to historians who are looking for a solid model of how to study the inner workings of early Mormon missionary work. It may also serve as a beacon to light the path to improving missionary work in foreign lands today.

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