BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by: Daniel Johnson, University of Leicester, UK. Email: dj111@leicester.ac.uk

*A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship* is the latest publication in a series of studies on this recent phenomenon. Ruth and Lim’s 2016 *Lovin’ on Jesus* began this research journey, exploring some of the key features that define the theology and praxis of contemporary worship. *A History* develops this work by presenting two simultaneous narratives and tracing their developments until they eventually merged. Ruth and Lim use the analogy of two rivers, Contemporary Worship and Praise and Worship respectively, to present their central thesis, and show how these rivers flowed in parallel throughout much of the twentieth century before eventually converging at the millennium. This image had been used in Ruth’s *Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, but here it forms the framework for the whole book.

The strengths of *A History* are many. The work has a blend of intricate detail and broad storytelling, told by two scholars who possess a masterful ownership of the material. The Praise and Worship story begins with Canadian pastor Reg Layzell, who discovered the power of Psalm 22.3 (“But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel”; KJV) in January 1946. This encounter became the fountainhead for the Latter Rain movement, which believed that praise and worship facilitated a dynamic encounter with the presence of God. Contemporary Worship, in contrast, has its origins in the evangelistic missions of Finney and Moody, and came to fullness in response to the cultural shifts in the 1950s and 1960s. The key Scripture in this movement was 1 Corinthians 9.22 (“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some”). This evangelistic pragmatism later became the Church Growth movement, as seen in the writing and ministry of pastors such as Rich Warren and Bill Hybels. And then, in the 1990s, these two rivers (more accurately, tributaries) became one, as movements such as Hillsongs and Passion saw exponential church growth while espousing the primacy of meeting God in worship.

The book utilizes a vast array of archival material and primary source interviews, and Ruth and Lim guide the reader into the minutiae of historical analysis. For example, in one footnote, Reg Layzell’s account is corrected; Layzell stated in 1979 that the day he discovered the potential of Psalm 22.3 was a Wednesday,
but according to Ruth and Lim, “his dating must be off, since January 3, 1946, was a Thursday” (p. 9). There are occasional asides to the reader, to ensure they are following the flow (such as on p. 167, as the river of Contemporary Worship appears on the landscape of the book). Ruth and Lim’s interdisciplinary approach is effective; the rise of Contemporary Worship is situated in the early twentieth-century emergence of generations (pp. 178–84). This approach means that the stories they tell have a strong supporting cast.

The great strength of the book is that it definitively undermines the laziest critique of this movement(s); namely, that Contemporary Praise and Worship is practice-driven, devoid of rigorous theology. Critics of the movement contrast the apparently shallow lyrics with the greatest moments of the hymn tradition. However, Ruth and Lim have shown that Reg Layzell and the subsequent Praise and Worship movement had a robust hermeneutical approach to Scripture; subsequently, the songs that were borne out of this theology concentrate on the relationship between praise and presence. Similarly, Contemporary Worship cannot be dismissed as crass pragmatism; the proponents and practitioners located their liturgical developments within an articulated biblical framework.

Ruth and Lim resist any attempt at criticizing these innovations. And while many may feel that there are legitimate reasons to ask questions of both tributaries as well as the subsequent river they combined to become, such questions will need to be asked in the context of this work. The historicity of the book is meticulous and unbiased. By dividing the narrative into two parts, it ensures that any subsequent engagement with these historical developments must be equally rigorous. Alongside this, Ruth and Lim have provided a far more detailed context for the emerging scholarly work that is engaging with Contemporary Praise and Worship (see for example the Congregational Music Studies Series published by Routledge). As such, A History will have a reciprocal and conversational approach to more focused works, and will be a present feature in much of the research that it generates.

If there are any weaknesses in the book, they lie in the abrupt beginnings and endings of the story. While the case for Reg Layzell’s unique experiences and influence is compelling, I was left curious about the nature of congregational song in the four decades since the Azusa Street revival. Every work of history needs a beginning point, and it could be that A History facilitates further retrospective studies. Similarly, Part Three of the book is far shorter than each of the preceding sections. Arguably, the innovations and developments that have taken place since the turn of the century require their own book, but here the conclusion felt abrupt in comparison to the earlier chapters. A History concentrates almost entirely on North America, and as such only tells part of the story of what was and is a global movement. But it must be noted that these criticisms could be more accurately summed up by wishing that this book was a multi-volume series.

In A History, Ruth and Lim have brought years of research into focus, and in doing so, have brought the practitioners and theologies of contemporary praise and worship into a compelling, engaging, and sympathetic narrative. And, to borrow their metaphor, this book will now become the sea from which much further scholarship will flow.

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