

Paul Rorem. *Singing Church History: Introducing the Christian Story through Hymn Texts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. 240 pages. \$34.

What can we learn about the history of the church and the development of Christian doctrine through the witness of hymn texts? In this illuminating book, Paul Rorem examines several major eras and turning points in church history by attending closely to the church's song. In so doing, the reader is introduced not only to the history of the church and its doctrine but also to the history of congregational singing. Along the way, readers encounter many influential figures, some well-known and some lesser known. The result is a greater appreciation for the ways in which music has contributed to the development of doctrine and the formation of Christian worshippers.

Roughly half of the book focuses on the Reformation era and following, which is not surprising, given the enormous changes to congregational singing brought about by Martin Luther and other figures in the Protestant Reformation. Given that reality, however, it is a significant achievement to focus the first half of the book on many lesser-known hymn texts and hymn writers from pre-Reformation times. This includes many theologians whose names might be familiar to us—Ambrose of Milan, John of Damascus, and Thomas Aquinas—but whose contribution to hymnody may be unknown or underappreciated.

Any author who approaches the history of church music needs to provide context for the many biblical and extrabiblical sources of hymn lyrics, as well as the many functions of congregational singing, whether tied to the “Ordinary” of the mass (a.k.a., “service music”) or serving some other liturgical function (e.g., corporate prayer or praise). Rorem does an admirable job of explaining this context—even explaining the evolution of Western church music itself—while staying focused on the main purpose of the book, namely, to trace some of the major contours of Christian doctrine and piety through a sampling of significant hymn texts.

Whether intended by the author or not, the book also became, for me, an occasion for gratitude. Even though I am broadly familiar with many of the texts, tunes, writers, and theological turning points Rorem covers, this book deepened my appreciation for the work of so many figures throughout history who have inspired devotion by means of poetic texts paired with memorable tunes. To give one example, the name John Mason Neal reoccurs multiple times throughout this volume, demonstrating Neal's enormous impact—and the impact of the nineteenth century Oxford Movement more broadly—in providing modern English translations of classic texts. Although the average reader of this volume may be familiar with hymn writers such as Fanny Crosby and Thomas Dorsey, it is doubtful that Neal is widely known outside of church music specialists. Yet the influence of translation work is an indispensable part of the story. As Rorem reminds us, “Protestants sing more hymns from the Middle Ages than they might realize” (41).

It makes sense that the author of this volume is a Lutheran pastor, given the influence of Luther himself as a translator, writer, and fervent promoter of congregational hymn singing. In many ways, this book highlights the valuable but often unseen labor of hymnologists—especially, in this case, the compilers of the hymnal *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW). However, because of Rorem's choice of ELW as a hymnal of reference, the book sometimes reads like an insider text for the Lutheran world. Even with this limitation, the book does an excellent job of explaining the historical context of beloved hymns from a range of traditions and highlighting some hidden gems from the early centuries of the church. Nonetheless, the focus on

Lutheran compilations may cause some non-Lutheran readers, such as myself, to feel that the book is not written for them.

This focus on (printed) Lutheran worship resources might also explain Rorem's lack of engagement with a major musical movement in today's church—the global phenomenon of “contemporary worship” or “praise and worship music.” Although the author provides a helpful overview of indigenous, postcolonial songwriting in Africa, Latin America, and East Asia post-1950, he leaves the “contemporary worship” movement unexplored. Despite this omission, the book demonstrates an impressive command of church history, Christian theology, and congregational song practices. Readers—especially those with an interest in church music—will be delighted to learn more about the scriptural, theological, and historical context of hymn texts and to see how those texts have both expressed and shaped the faith of Christian believers throughout the centuries.

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