

The Battle Hymn Refuted

by David O. Jones

The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” occupies a prominent position not only within the program of nearly every nationalistic celebration, but also has become a part of many Christian services. Admittedly, the anthem sounds good, but it is far from being a “hymn” in the traditional sense of the word. Many Christians understand its stirring words to provide an image of a victorious Church, but that is just not so! The connotations of a spiritualized patriotism which have endeared it to many, result from a mistaken and cursory reading of the song.

By definition, a hymn is a song which incorporates theological truth into its text. Wonderful examples of Christian hymns are “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” and “How Firm a Foundation.” But despite its author’s use of biblical phrasing, the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” is not about Christ “marching” against sin and the Church being “victorious” over evil. The theological truths which it expresses are *anti-Christian* and *anti-biblical*, thus it should never be sung by a Christian congregation.

The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” was written in the fall of 1861. While in Washington, D.C. with her husband, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe watched troops marching off to war singing “John Brown’s Body.” She determined to write a more inspiring war song to what was a good melody. First published in the Atlantic Monthly, she received five dollars for her literary effort.

Born into a prominent New York City family, Julia Ward was raised in a conservative, Christian home. As a young woman she rebelled against her parents’ strong Calvinism and ultimately married the Boston reformer, Dr. Samuel G. Howe. She adopted the tenants of Transcendentalism, then Unitarianism, and it was in that light that the “Battle Hymn” was written.

The Transcendentalists became the core of the radical abolitionist movement. Dr. Howe, as well as their Boston pastor, the Reverend Theodore Parker were two members of the “Secret Six” who financed and armed the anti-slavery terrorist John Brown. After his murderous rampage in Kansas and at Harper’s Ferry, Mrs. Howe lamented, “John Brown’s death will be holy and glorious. John Brown will glorify the gallows like Jesus glorified the cross.”

The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” can only be understood within the framework of the Transcendentalist-Unitarian creed. The first verse reads:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword.
His truth is marching on.

Mrs. Howe applied the apocalyptic judgment of the Revelation (14:17-20 & 19:15) to the Confederate nation. She pictured the Union army not only as that instrument which would cause Southern blood to flow out upon the earth, but also the Union army as the very expression of His Word (sword) itself. The Transcendentalist-Unitarians believed that the evil in man could be rooted out by governmental action. The South was evil and was thus deserving of judgment of the most extreme nature—its own Armageddon.

The second verse follows the same theme by presenting the Union army as the abode of their vengeful God.

I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.
His day is marching on.

The third verse is so contrary of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that many hymnals leave it out altogether.

I have read the fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel.
As ye deal with My contempters, so with you My grace shall deal;
Let the hero born of woman crush the serpent with his heel.
Since God is marching on.

Mrs. Howe proclaimed a gospel of judgment pictured by rows of affixed bayonets. Taking God's promise of deliverance from Genesis 3:15, she applied it not to Christ, but to the Union soldier who would receive God's grace by killing Southerners. This was certainly a different gospel; the kind of which the Apostle Paul said, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:8)

Verse four returns to the prose of the Apocalypse with trumpet and judgment seat imagery:

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never sound retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat.
O be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

The problem again is that civil warfare was the instrument being promoted for determining the hearts of men. A man's positive response to the call for enlistment in the Union army was the action which would reveal their standing before God.

The fifth and final verse gives the ultimate expression of the warped and anti-biblical theology which possessed the radical abolitionists.

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me.
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

To Julia Ward Howe the work of Christ was incomplete. It was up to men through civil government to bring about a utopian society. She was quoted in her biography, “Not until the Civil War did I officially join the Unitarian church and accept the fact the *Christ was merely a great teacher with no higher claim to preeminence in wisdom, goodness, and power than any other man.*” (emphasis mine)

The “Battle Hymn” theme has nothing to do with Christianity or God. It is a political-patriotic song about the destruction of the South, written in religious terminology. It is a clever product. Howe deliberately created the idea that the North was doing God’s work. It paints a picture of a vengeful God destroying His enemies—the South, and elevating the North’s cause to that of a “holy war.” In doing so, Howe portrayed the South and its people as evil and the enemy of God. Outrageous, but it worked.

As a Unitarian, Julia Ward Howe believed the Unitarian doctrine that man is characteristically good and he can redeem himself by his own merits without any help from a savior. She rejected basic biblical truths such as a literal hell—“I threw away, once and forever, the thought of the terrible hell which appears to me impossible.”

Mrs. Howe also refuted the exclusive claim of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:6) by saying, “Having rejected the exclusive doctrine that made Christianity and special forms of it the only way of spiritual redemption, I now accept the belief that not only Christians but all human beings, no matter what their religion, are capable of redemption. Christianity was but one of God’s plans for bringing all of humanity to a state of ultimate perfection.”

Our challenge is to bring a proper understanding of the nature of this battle anthem to the leadership of the Christian church. No Christian church would intentionally sing a song of praise to Satan’s doctrines, nor would any pastor or elder lead their flock into rebellion against true biblical doctrine. Yet by ignorance, it has been done on a regular basis in the American church. The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” is apostasy. It promotes hatred and vengeful destruction. It has no place in a worship service.