

# Blasphemy in Song

by **Laurence M. Vance**

This past weekend, since it was the closest weekend to the Fourth of July holiday that we observe today, churches all across America resounded with patriotic songs. Although the wisdom of singing patriotic songs in church is itself a debatable proposition, there should be no debate in any church about uttering words of blasphemy, whether spoken or sung. Yet, the patriotic song that is perhaps the one most frequently sung in the churches of America — for the Fourth of July or otherwise — is the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." But this so-called hymn is no Christian hymn at all — it is blasphemy in song.

Most Americans are familiar with the words of this "hymn":

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 hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on.

Chorus

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.

Chorus

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:  
"As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;  
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,  
Since God is marching on."

Chorus

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

Chorus

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.

Chorus

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,  
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succour to the brave,  
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave,  
Our God is marching on.

Chorus

The chorus is, of course, as follows:

Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
His truth is marching on.

Although most Americans who are familiar with this "patriotic anthem" rightly connect it with the so-called Civil War, many probably don't know who wrote it, and even fewer know anything about how it came about.

The author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was the abolitionist and social activist, Julia Ward Howe (1819—1910). The song first appeared, minus the last verse, on the front cover of *The Atlantic Monthly* for February 1862. That it originally had six verses can be seen by looking at her [first draft](#), which was written on a scrap of Sanitary Commission paper. Christian hymnbooks that contain this song only include verses one, two, four, and five. The words as it was first published are slightly different than her original draft, which is transcribed [here](#).



The tune is from a camp-meeting song with a "Glory Hallelujah" refrain by William Steffe, written about 1856. This tune was in turn used for what became the Union marching song, "John Brown's Body," the first verse of which begins by repeating three times: "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave," and ends with: "His soul goes marching on!" Other lines read: "They will hang Jeff. Davis to a sour apple tree!" and "Now, three rousing cheers for the Union."

According to the account in *Julia Ward Howe, 1819—1910* by Laura E. Richards, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), in December of 1861, as Howe returned

from a review of troops near Washington, her carriage was surrounded and delayed by the marching regiments: she and her companions sang, to beguile the tedium of the way, the war songs which every one was singing in those days; among them —

"John Brown's body lies a-moulding in the grave.

His soul is marching on!"

The soldiers liked this, cried, "Good for you!" and took up the chorus with its rhythmic swing.

"Mrs. Howe," said Mr. Clarke, "why do you not write some good words for that stirring tune?"

"I have often wished to do so!" she replied.

Waking in the gray of the next morning, as she lay waiting for the dawn, the word came to her.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord — "

She lay perfectly still. Line by line, stanza by stanza, the words came sweeping on with the rhythm of marching feet, pauseless, resistless. She saw the long lines swinging into place before her eyes, heard the voice of the nation speaking through her lips. She waited till the voice was silent, till the last line was ended; then sprang from bed, and groping for pen and paper, scrawled in the gray twilight the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." She was used to writing thus; verses often came to her at night, and must be scribbled in the dark for fear of waking the baby; she crept back to bed, and as she fell asleep she said to herself, "I like this better than most things I have written." In the morning, while recalling the incident, she found she had forgotten the words.

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Ignorance of history is no sin, and can easily be remedied with a computer and a search engine or a trip to the library. But more important than the history behind this "hymn" is the theology behind it. Hymns are sung in church as part of the worship of God. They contain a spiritual message. Hymns should not be sung in church merely because they have a nice tune. The words of a hymn are therefore very important.

Although the Bible likens Christians to soldiers (2 Timothy 2:3), and the Christian life to a battle (1 Timothy 1:18), the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is not a song that should be on the lips of any Christian. It is not a Christian hymn at all. It is a disgrace that the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" even appears in a Christian hymnbook alongside of such great hymns of the faith as: "Blessed Redeemer," "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name," "The Way of the Cross Leads Home," "That Beautiful Name," and "O Worship the King." Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian, and wrote the song as a partisan Unionist during the beginning of the Civil War. The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is religious war propaganda. It is no more a Christian hymn than "White Christmas."

Like many who lived during the nineteenth century, Howe was very familiar with the Bible. Consequently, the language and imagery of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" are largely biblical. The problem, however, is that Howe applied the judgment of the "day of the Lord" to the destruction of the Southern armies by the North.

A brief historical and biblical analysis of each verse of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is as follows:

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 hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on.

"Mine eyes have seen" is from the prophet Isaiah's vision of the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1). But rather than seeing the coming of the Lord, Isaiah saw "the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). Howe never saw the coming of the Lord, and the very idea that the coming of the Union Army was akin to the coming of the Lord is blasphemous. "Trampling out the vintage" is a reference to the end times spoken of in the Book of Revelation: "the wine of the wrath of God" (Revelation 14:10), "the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath" (Revelation 16:19), "he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Revelation 19:15). Howe originally used the word "winepress" instead of "vintage." The word "trampling" is taken from the Old Testament: "I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment" (Isaiah 63:3). Lightning is sometimes associated with the judgment of God (Psalm 18:14, 144:6; Revelation 8:5, 11:19, 16:18). The "terrible swift sword" is a reference to Christ's sword (Revelation 1:16, 2:12, 2:16, 19:15, 19:21). God's truth is not marching on, it is "fallen in the street" (Isaiah 59:14). And the Union Army marching is certainly not God's truth personified, not when the Bible reserves that honor for Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

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.

In this verse God is said to be in the camps of the Union Army, a dubious proposition, considering that it was an invading army. "Builded Him an altar" is straight out of the Bible (Genesis 8:20; Exodus 24:4; Ezra 3:2). God's "righteous sentence" is perhaps taken from references to God's "righteous judgment" (Romans 2:5) or "righteous judgments" (Psalm 119:160). "His day" is a reference to the "day of the Lord," falsely equating the marching of the Union Army with the judgment of God.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:  
"As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;  
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,  
Since God is marching on."

This verse is so blasphemous that it is not included in Christian hymnals that contain the "Battle Hymn." Perhaps if it was then Christians would have their eyes opened as to the true nature of this "hymn." The "burnished rows of steel" refer to the polished Union cannons. This is not the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). This is "another gospel," of which the Apostle Paul said: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8). And what grace is this: Punish the evil Southerners and I will give you grace? This concept of grace is foreign to the New Testament. Jesus Christ crushing the serpent with his heel is a perversion of Genesis 3:15 where the Lord says to the serpent: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." And in the New Testament, when the Apostle Paul said that "the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly" (Romans 16:20), he was not referring to anything that was to take place during the American Civil War. And God certainly was not "marching on" under the figure of the Union Army.

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

Howe's reference to a trumpet instead of a bugle has biblical overtones. A trumpet figures prominently in references to the end times (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; Revelation 1:10, 4:1, 8:13, 9:14). The judgment seat is a reference to the judgment seat of Christ, mentioned twice by the Apostle Paul (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10). God has not yet sifted out the hearts of Christians at this judgment, nor yet the hearts of anyone else at the "great white throne" judgment (Revelation 20:11—13). One thing is for sure, Christians had better be swift to answer the Lord at the Judgment when asked why they sang such a blasphemous song.

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.

Christ was not born "in the beauty of the lilies." He was laid in a manger (Luke 2:7), not in a garden. The "glory in His bosom" is certainly scriptural, and is a reference to the account of Christ's transfiguration before his disciples where "his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). But he was the one who was transfigured. The glory of Christ transfiguring "you and me" is pure universalism as advocated by Unitarians. The third line in this verse is one of the most egregious in the whole "hymn." Not only does the phrase "as he died to make men holy" also smack of universalism, equating the Atonement of the Son of God with the death of Union soldiers supposedly dying to "make men free," it is the height of blasphemy. This phrase also shows us that there are other reasons besides biblical ones for not singing the "Battle Hymn," for, theological questions aside, the Union soldiers didn't "die to make men free." This is the great myth of the Civil War, and would be news to Abraham Lincoln since he maintained that freeing the slaves was not what his war was about. In an August 22, 1862, letter to Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, Lincoln explained:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving

others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed no one since not only did it only apply to slaves in the states that were in rebellion against the United States, where the U.S. government had no authority, but it specifically exempted all the territory that was occupied by Union armies, where the U.S. government had authority. The fact that many churches today in the Deep South sing the "Battle Hymn" shows just how strong this myth has taken hold. For the deflating of more myths of the Civil War, see my article on [slavery myths](#) and Thomas DiLorenzo's article on [Lincoln myths](#).

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,  
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succour to the brave,  
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave,  
Our God is marching on.

This verse was probably omitted early on because it is noticeably different from the others. Excepting the last line, some of the concepts are biblical, but have nothing to do with the Civil War.

In 1901, in the wake of American imperialism in the Spanish and Philippine Wars, Mark Twain penned a parody of the "Battle Hymn," from the perspective of an American industrialist, entitled "The Battle Hymn of the Republic, Updated":

Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword;  
He is searching out the hoardings where the stranger's wealth is stored;  
He hath loosed his fateful lightnings, and with woe and death has scored;  
His lust is marching on.

I have seen him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;  
They have builded him an altar in the Eastern dews and damps;  
I have read his doomful mission by the dim and flaring lamps-  
His night is marching on.

I have read his bandit gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:  
"As ye deal with my pretensions, so with you my wrath shall deal;  
Let the faithless son of Freedom crush the patriot with his heel;  
Lo, Greed is marching on!"

We have legalized the strumpet and are guarding her retreat;  
Greed is seeking out commercial souls before his judgement seat;  
O, be swift, ye clods, to answer him! be jubilant my feet!  
Our god is marching on!

In a sordid slime harmonious Greed was born in yonder ditch,  
With a longing in his bosom-and for others' goods an itch.  
As Christ died to make men holy, let men die to make us rich —  
Our god is marching on.

The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" ought to be parodied, satirized, and lampooned. It has nothing to do with God or Christianity. It is not a Christian hymn. It does not belong in a Christian hymnbook. It should not be sung in any Christian church — Northern or Southern. It should not be on the lips of any Christian — Yankee or Southerner. It is partisan political paeon to bogus history and faulty theology. For much too long Christians <http://www.lewrockwell.com/vance/vance84.html>

have sung this "hymn" with religious fervor while remaining in ignorance as to its history and theology. For much too long pastors and song leaders have included this "hymn" in church services without stopping to consider whether it is an appropriate song for a Christian worship service. Disparaging the singing of this song has nothing to do with being a Confederate sympathizer, or being unpatriotic or anti-Lincoln, but it has everything to do with exercising biblical discernment. Traditions are hard to break, and especially religious ones, but the singing of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is one that must go.

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*Laurence M. Vance [*[send him mail](#)*] is a freelance writer and an adjunct instructor in accounting and economics at Pensacola Junior College in Pensacola, FL. He is also the director of the* [Francis Wayland Institute](#)*. His new book is* [Christianity and War and Other Essays Against the Warfare State](#)*. Visit* [his website](#)*.*

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